

# Halo: Hyper Lethal Vectors

by Rowboatt

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Summary: Planet Reach, the last military uphold for humanity, has fallen. From the ashes rises Noble Six of the Spartan III program who takes her fight to the Pillar of Autumn. She expects more bloodshed, expects the Covie bastards to play dirty. And she expects to get an edge against the enemy. As the saying goes, be careful for what wish you for, because she receives all three.

## 1. Reveille

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I do not own Bungie/343 Industries' characters, I am merely using them to entertain myself. And you all. So suck it.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>The missile round hit the Covenant Super Carrier, a loud <em>ping</em> as the result. Slowly, step by step, the Lieutenant stepped down the ladder. Her helmet tilted towards her fallen comrade, Emile, then turned away, wanting to forget the scene as soon as she had seen it. But the death was fit for Emile's personality; an invincible, stereotypical brick wall. Noble Six eyed the distance between the platform she was currently standing on and the pelican that was heading in her direction. Her brows furrowed, but all questions were answered as a cheering voice came across the COM.

"\_Orders from Captain Keyes L.T.! A special pick up- you must be some soldier!\_" Fohammer chuckled and spun the pelican around, the hatch opening.

The Spartan III stepped on, wasting no time, and smiled just slightly. "Thank youâ€|I don't believe we met before, but I can tell you're going to be doing things like this quite a lot."

The female pilot laughed again, and pushed the power on the UNSC drop ship, barely flying over the dust and echoes bellow and into the

shuttle bay on the Pillar of Autumn as the air pressure doors sealed. The engines blew hot air onto the metal deck beneath it, making an ear popping whistle. Fohammer parked her ship, and shut down the power before slipping out of the leather seat and jumping to smack her co-pilot on the elbow.

Marines from every corner rushed in the bay, helping the Captain get off of the pelican. Keyes' focus, however, was on the drop ship fifty feet away. 'Did she?' I can't leave anyone behind'I won't allow it' Lieutenant, Spartan 312, set her feet down on flat floor in relief, only to be showered by smaller men in military uniforms, shouting commands.

Keyes smiled and turned heading to the service elevator with one of his officers close behind and typed in the code necessary to go to the Bridge. Once there, he held the large cylinder in his hands before pushing it into a large terminal. Seconds passed by before the silhouette of a ghost he once knew appeared. Personnel on the brig prepared the Autumn, already charging up her defense systems. Keyes didn't even glance at Cortana as he punched in random coordinates and pulled the war ship out of planet Reach's orbit.

A message came across the COMM channels; "Everybody hang on!"

Lines ran under the eyes of Spartan-312 as she stared in the mirror. Another rumble came from the ship and she gripped the counter to keep balance, her lids sliding closed in annoyance. The shaking of the UNSC Cruiser nearly provoked her to head up to the Bridge and voluntarily drive them to their destination. There weren't any orders from the Captain yet, so the Lieutenant had taken the chance to relax and check over her suit of armor. On the counter sat the steel colored MARK V [B] helmet. With a sigh, the female adjusted the data pad settings on her wrist. The COMMS overhead pulled her attention to the ceiling.

"Lieutenant B-312, report to Cyrostorage Unit Two, on the double soldier." Keyes' voice sounded off in the bathroom, solid, commanding echoes bouncing back at the woman.

"Understood, Captain!" The helmet was sealed onto her face by then and she was out the door no more than thirty seconds later, meeting and following an enlightened marine who was all too happy to lead the way.

The marine's name, learned through several, quickly spoken and stuttered more than once sentences, was Wallace A. Jenkins. He grinned nervously as the Spartan stood next to him, the silence in the elevator gnawing at him. There wasn't much space to move in, due to the woman on his left, making him feel more awkward than he did when he was speaking. A small cough came from the Private, before the Lieutenant finally looked over, into his eyes. The stare was intimidating, but Jenkins just kept the grin plastered on his face. He wanted to remain respectful, and most of all look good in the presence of this soldier. Not just any soldier however, but a Spartan.

Moments passed by before he spoke again, this time quiet; "So did you have any teammates back on Reach? Anyone you miss?"

It was odd the air felt strange, even as the words left Jenkins'

mouth and he sunk his teeth into his tongue, embarrassed.

"U-uhâ€¦never mind, you don't have to answer that, I was just-"

"Yesâ€¦" The Lieutenant started, interrupting the start of the babbling just in time. "I did have teammatesâ€¦They stayed behind."

Large brown eyes searched the helmet that had turned towards the doors, which were sliding open with a soft \_hiss\_.

"I can find my way from here, thank you."

Before another word could be uttered, she was out of the elevator and down the hall, silent but quick- a lone wolf. Jenkins scratched the side of his freshly shaven hair in dismay and shock. Was it true what people had said about the Spartans?

"\_Jenkins\_! Where the hell have you been soldier? Get over here, on the double!" Barked none other than Sargent Major Johnson, who had an assault rifle propped onto his shoulder.

"Sir!" Came the usual reply, and the sound of footsteps followed.

After rounding several corners, the Lieutenant found herself at a door, in the middle of a hallway. A red rectangle was painted next to it and stenciled in white was the words '\_Cyrostorage Unit Two\_'. It slid open before her covered fingers could even touch the pad on the door, revealing a casket in the center of the bay. The sound of the metallic heels sounded hollow, almost empty.

"\_Greetings ma'am, we were just waiting for you to come on down before we started\_," Sam Marcus greeted, sounding almost \_too\_ self-conscious. The Spartan had only turned and nodded, then turned back again proceeding to the casket. There were murmurs in the observation theater and the overhead was cued once more.

"Alright, let's thaw him out," Thom Shepard muttered, the lines under his eyes matching his attitude perfectly. "Stand by." The sounds of buttons being pressed was all the Lieutenant could hear from the observation deck.

The lid of the casket popped slightly, started to lift, then released air, the glass of the casket became covered in fog. The woman who had once been Noble Six took another step forward, curious, cautious as well, about her knew- well, she wasn't exactly sure what she was supposed to call this Spartan. The only thing she knew was that he was a part of the II program, like Jorge had been. A question prodded at the back of her mind. Would that mean that he too would be just as remarkable as her fallen comrade?

The Master Chief floated in what started off as a comfortable, seemingly enjoyable dream. But it all changed, turned sour as he was thawed out. Pale eyelids snapped open, as well as dried lips. The lid of his casket opened to reveal a Tech Officer. He rambled on about freezer burn, apologizing for the quick thaw, and ended the small talk by saying how things were 'hectic'. Something caught the Chief's

eye though, as he stepped out of the cryotube and onto the platform beneath the massive human. Another Spartan, one he had never seen before, was standing in a comfortable posture. The helmet was tilted upwards, towards the observation deck, causing the man to look up to the deck as well. However, receiving only a wave from another crewman, he moved his gaze back to the smaller soldier.

"You can take a moment to walk around the Cyro-bay sir," Shepard nodded, and walked over to a testing area, loading diagnostics for the Master Chief.

The super-soldier nodded and walked over to the armored woman. The Lieutenant looked up, being pulled away from her thoughts, at her new teammate. A hand was extended. She looked down, tilted her head just slightly, and then remembered Jorge. The pat on the back she received at the top of Sword Base, the scene replayed itself. The genuine compliment and her cocky version of a 'thank you'.

The woman gripping his forearm instead of his hand was unexpected, but the Chief smiled slightly and did the same.

"Spartan B-312, Lieutenant."

"Spartan 117, Master Chief Petty Officer."

The Lieutenant mentally, but mockingly, cursed the taller man, nodding respectively toward the coordination diagnostics. He took the hint and walked over to Shepard, starting the usual warm-ups for his helmet's display. The L.T. took note of how he also wore MARK V armor, and used her time to step out of the bay, only to come back in with weapons attached to her suit.

She possessed two side arms, on her left seal a sub-machine gun and the right and pistol. Sealed to her back however, was a MA5B- a classic assault rifle, loaded and ready. Weapon diagnostics were set and the Lieutenant was ready to go. The only thing missing was grenades. The fact that she didn't have any explosives was disappointing, but she figured she could find something along the way. Right now, she needed to attend to more urgent matters, so she moved over to the coordination diagnostics, watching Shepard work with the Master Chief- her new comrade.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Note: <strong>Okay, well I know that a few of you might be confused by this. This is the second time I have posted this story. I know, I know: I'm an amateur. Well SORRY for being SO NAIVE.

Anyway-I'm new to fanfiction (.net, etc, ftw?) as you probably already know by now. This is the first story I'm putting out there, so please don't be afraid to comment or give constructive criticism. It's always helpful~. Also, I do take story ideas and love inspiration when I can get it. If you have an idea of something you want me to write, pitch it! I don't mind requests! Just don't expect them to come so quickly- I have a life too. 3 Thank you for reading, and I can't wait to see what you say!

-Until next time, my little Marines!

## 2. Cyborgs and AI

As the shield energy test finished, Captain Jacob Keyes' voice echoed from the intercom.

"Bridge to Cyro Two- this is Captain Keyes. Send both the Master Chief and the Lieutenant to the bridge immediately."

Shepard pressed his lips together and tried to reason: "Captain we'll have to skip the weapons diagnostics and I-"

"On the double crewman," growled the commanding officer, before switching off the connection.

"Aye aye, sir."

The officer turned towards the taller figures and nodded. "The Skipper seems jumpy. We better get moving. We'll find you weapons later, Chief."

A subtle nod was given as a reply and Shepard swallowed back the lump in his throat. Cortana had made an announcement not too long ago about Covenant boarding craft. He'd cherished the time he could not on duty, and now he longed to be back home, or at least somewhere away from this ship. But that wasn't the case for him, unfortunately.

Sam saw the Spartans and Shepard head for the door and unlocked it, nodding as he spoke from the deck. "Okay, I'll leave the self-diagnostics running at least."

"Good idea!" Shepard called from below. "You better get to your evac group Sam."

"Affirmative, I just have to reset the computer, and then I'm out of here!" The younger man said cheerfully and smiled, working away at the buttons. But it faded as loud poundings came from the door across the small deck.

The Master Chief and the Lieutenant watched as there was a flash of metal and fire. Plasma fire went into the room and hit Sam square in the chest. He clutched his chest, the look on his face one of shock, before he fell to his knees, scrambling for something they couldn't see. A maroon armored Elite beat the human to the punch and pinned his arm to the ground with his foot, then aimed the plasma rifle and fired.

"Sam!" Cried Shepard, reaching a hand out, thoughts racing back and forth in his head, his heart pounding in his ears.

Silence remained company and the now friendless man shook his head, turning back to the human companions behind him. "Come on, we've got to get the hell out of here!"

The crewman ran out of the door first, followed by the Master Chief, then the Lieutenant. They all moved down the corridor, towards a door when a sudden explosion killed their escort. The Chief recalled maps

and passageways of Halcyon-class ships, when the Lieutenant called him over.

"Here," she said, pointing at the other side of a pair of power conduits. Not waiting for a response, she jumped over them and landed in the maintenance hallway. The Chief mimicked the action and looked down at the smaller frame before him.

"I'll take point." She said calmly, gripping the handle of her rifle and sliding it off of her back seal, then handed over the sub-machine gun. The Chief nodded and stayed behind.

"I've never seen you on the Autumn before, so it surprised me when you found that small cut-through," The Spartan II remarked, as they walked down the hall and through a door, making a series of sharp turns in minute halls.

"It would make sense, sense I've never even boarded this ship before—well, before my last mission."

The Lieutenant rolled under a half raised door and came to her feet, checked her corners and found the Master Chief by her side, doing the same. He decided to push on with the query- it would be a more comfortable and easier process if they had at least gotten to know something about the other before they were fighting side by side.

"Then you must study ships."

The slight ease of her shoulders told the Chief that he was correct. "It's my greatest asset, yes. I have excellent piloting skills." The duo decided to take a right, taking advantage of what little time they had and jogged.

Eventually, the jogging led them to a dark hallway. The Lieutenant took point again, moving quickly. In result, she came face to face with an Elite who roared, his attention elsewhere as marines pumped bullets into its chest and it fell with an agonizing snarling sound.

The Chief brought her vitals onto his HUD, nodded in thanks towards the soldiers and gently pushed the Spartan III forward. She obliged and regained the sense of ease, her heart rate dropping to a regular pace.

"Take it easy, you shouldn't be moving so fast," he said firmly, jogging alongside the L.T.

She nodded, the grip on the assault rifle tightening. "Yes, sir."

There was a passageway, the sound of thick metal hitting even thicker metal, then a short silence as a blue arrow and the words 'Bridge' stenciled inside it appeared. The Spartans looked at each other for a moment then proceeded onto the Bridge.

\* \* \*

><p>Naval personnel worked endlessly, all attending to different tasks- repelling Seraph fighters, damage control on the ship itself,

or using the ship's environmental systems to detach the atmosphere from sealed off areas where the Covenant- and other soldiers and personnel- were located.<p>

Keyes stood at the center of the deck, keeping his eyes on the displayed image of a large ring. Standing behind their commanding officer, the Spartans came to attention, speaking in unison: "Captain Keyes."

The Captain turned to face the small team. The lost color in his face returned, like hope was just placed inside of him from even taking a single glimpse of the people that stood before him. Respectfully Keyes nodded, his arms behind his back.

"Good to see you Master Chief-Lieutenant. Things aren't going well. Cortana did her best, but we never had a chance."

The ghost of doctor the Lieutenant had met on Reach, Cortana, appeared on the terminal next to the screen, her back faced towards the humans.

"A dozen Covenant superior battle ships against a single Halcyon-class cruiserâ€|With those odds we still managed three-"A momentary pause stopped the conversation and the A.I. spoke again, analyzing new data. "Make that four kills."

Cortana looked over at the Spartans, and then moved her attention to the Chief. "Sleep well?"

"No thanks to your driving, yes."

"So you\_ did\_ miss me," she muttered, smiling.

Before any response could be made, a blast ricocheted through the ship. Personnel on deck fell to the floor as the Captain took grip of the console in front of him for balance.

"Report!" He barked, frowning at the sudden interruption. Covenant bastards just couldn't stay still for two minutes.

Cortana's avatar shimmered," It must have been one of their boarding parties. My guess is an antimatter charge."

One of the two fire control officers turned in his seat, sweat lingering across his panicked face. "Ma'am, fire control for the main cannon is offline!"

The A.I. frowned and turned to Keyes. The MAC cannon was the glue to keeping the Autumn's defenses together.

"Captain, the cannon was my last defensive option."

Keyes closed his eyes and looked up at the ring on the screen in front of him. There wasn't any other way. "All right. I'm initiating Cole Protocol, Article two. We're abandoning the Autumn- that means you too Cortana."

"While you do what? Go down with the ship?" She protested, gesturing towards the ring, emphasizing her point.

"In a manner of speaking," the Captain replied calmly, putting his Grandfather's pipe into one of his pockets. "The object that we've found- I'm going to try to land the Autumn on it."

It wasn't logical to land the ship on an unknown structure, built by some type of creature that they've yet to encounter. It was suicide. "With all due respect sirâ€|this war already has enough dead heroes."

The last remark finally received a reaction from Keyes. He turned, making eye contact, his facial features looked like they were made of stone. "I appreciate your concern Cortana- but it's not up to me. The Protocol is clear: destruction or capture of shipboard A.I. is absolutely unacceptable. Meaning you're abandoning ship. Lock in a selection of emergency landing zones, upload them to my neural-lace, and then sort yourself for a hard transfer."

Cortana looked at the ground, no longer willing to argue with authority and nodded. "Aye aye, sir."

The avatar of the blue woman dissolved into the terminal. Keyes turned towards the Spartans, the second part of the evacuation plan coming into focus now that he had dealt with the first part of it.

"Which is where you come in Spartans. Get Cortana off this ship. Keep her safe from the enemy. If they capture her, they'll learn everything: force deployment, weapon researchâ€|" The one thing that humanity could not afford to lose, the last frontier, the last planet left: "Earth."

"I understand," the Master Chief said truthfully. The L.T. nodded silently, her jaw clenching in concern at the mention of the planet she was fighting for.

The same silhouette of the two foot tall A.I. reappeared on the terminal.

Keyes raised an eyebrow, "Are you ready?"

A slow glance across her home; she didn't want to leave it. The last thing she looked at was the Lieutenant. "Yank me."

After touching a series of buttons, Keyes watched as the avatar dissolved into the terminal once more, then pulled a data chip from it. He handed it to the Master Chief, as well as his side arm- a pistol.

"Good luck Master Chief, Lieutenantâ€|I don't keep it loaded son, you'll have to find ammo."

The Lieutenant nodded as the Chief slipped the chip into the back slot of his helmet where the neural interface was located. A cooling sensation was felt, along with a small stab of pain. Keyes still held out the pistol, which was taken. The sub-machine had been handed back to its owner. Nothing else was said, so the trio team left the bridge, walking into the rest of the ship.

\* \* \*



><p>Human bodies lay across the corridor. It was clear that there had previously been a battle there before. The Lieutenant was alert, her assault rifle shouldered and pointing at every corner she could see. The Chief knelt next to a fallen woman, closed her eyelids and took some ammo along with her set of dog tags. He loaded the clip into the pistol and closed with a welcoming <em>click<em>.

"See anything?" He called, standing up.

"Nothingâ€|but there's noise coming down from the end of the corridor. Marines must have engaged in another fight at theâ€|" The L.T. paused and brought up a map of the ship onto her visor. "Mess hall," she concluded, looking over her shoulder.

"We should get moving then."

As they marched along the corridor, the sounds of squealing and barking caused them to pause. The Lieutenant ducked behind a wall, curious to see what the excitement was about. The Master Chief did the same, watching as a bright red armored Grunt scurried down the hall with two others, wearing a Marine belt. The Lieutenant sighed, clearly irritated by the sight, and attached the assault rifle to her back seal.

The Chief watched as his comrade pulled her sidearm, the classic 12.7 mm pistol up and aimed at a Grunt. One shot sped across the room and hit what seemed to be the leader of the small group straight in the face. It fell to the floor and the other two aliens pulled their plasma pistols from their waists, trembling and squealing in fear.

The Grunts looked about, searching for their enemy. A glimpse of shining metal caught the eyes of them both. The tip of the combat knife ran along the side of a Grunt's head, the jaw hanging loose from the head. The last five foot tall alien jumped and screamed as it dropped its weapon. It turned and tried to run, but fell to the ground as 500 pounds of flesh and armor tackled the short alien. It felt a sharp jab of pain as the knife went through its skull, and then went limp, dying a gruesome death.

Elapsed time: ten seconds. The Lieutenant stood, pulling her knife out of the skull of the enemy and flicked her wrist, trying to get the blood off. It was a truly horrifying and bloody scene as three different pools of neon colored blood started to form.

"Good work, Lieutenantâ€|a bit violent, I must say." Cortana said, surprising the L.T. She'd almost forgot that the A.I. even existed.

"Thank you."

"Mm? That's your only response?"

The Spartans approached the Mess Hall. On the floor of the entrance was what the Chief had been looking for- a MA5B. He shouldered it, just in time to see an Elite run past. He moved through the doorway, helping three other Marines take it down.

"Did you expect something else?" The Lieutenant casually asked, jumping over a table and firing bullets into a Grunt who had the

misfortune of being in her path.

Cortana's voice changed to an amused tone; she was beginning to like the Lieutenant. She had studied the Spartan III on Reach, but now having the time to actually interact with her escort was a completely different experience for her.

"I thought you would take it as an insult, really. But I was proven wrong."

Even though the L.T. hadn't taken off her helmet, Cortana could tell that she was grinning. Another trait she learned about her- Spartan 312 liked it when she was right.

\* \* \*

><p>There were several small battles and firefights the Spartans had ran through, but the last one was the most difficult. The Chief sprayed an Elite with bullets, piercing its armor and tearing into the sensitive flesh underneath. It ended its life with one last agonizing gurgle as it fell to the floor, followed by several of its comrades.<p>

The Lieutenant's rifle sputtered and hit five Grunts in the face. She looked to her left, eyeing a docked lifeboat. She ran over, the Master Chief not far behind, and stepped in, waiting for her fellow soldier to enter. A Marine had fallen to the floor in the process of trying to get inside as well. He covered his face, trembling and shouting in fear. The Chief picked him up with ease and tossed him inside, then turned and made sure that no other Covenant troops would decide to join them.

"\_Now\_ would be a very good time to leave!" Cortana shouted urgently, and he backed in the lifeboat. The door sealed and a red light flickered on.

"Punch it." The Spartan II commanded, turning to look at the other armored figure. The space was small, no thanks to the duo.

"Aye, aye sir!" The pilot called and went to work.

The lifeboat accelerated and left the \_Autumn\_. It approached its landing zone- the ring. Closing the external com system and setting up a secure link between the Lieutenant and himself, the Chief began to ask about their destination.

"Look!" The A.I. exclaimed and the Spartans moved towards the pilot, looking out the view port. The ring was coming in close, but that wasn't what caught their attention. The \_Pillar of Autumn\_ was coming in- and coming in \_fast\_. Cortana watched with amazement, her suspicions finally answered.

"I knew it! The \_Autumn\_ is accelerating! Keyes is going in manual!" She exclaimed, quite impressed with her Captain's piloting abilities.

The pilot turned her head just slightly to look back at everyone. "Heads-up everyone. This is it! We're entering the ring's atmosphere in five!"

"You two sure you rather wouldn't take a seat?" Cortana asked in disbelief.

"We'll be fine," the Chief answered for them both, earning a nod of support from the Lieutenant.

The Master Chief and the Lieutenant gripped bars on each side of the lifeboat, preparing for what they knew would be a hard landing.

"If I still had fingers, they'd be crossed," the A.I. muttered nervously.

The lifeboat dove into the atmosphere of the ring and shook in response. The Spartans braced themselves.

"Haloâ€|" The Master Chief heard someone mutter, but wasn't exactly sure who as the new structure- \_Halo\_ went from large to larger, second by second.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Note: <strong>Holy hell! Did you guys read that? They're about to hit a ring! Well I'll be damned-! Didn't see that one coming! :D

I've decided that I'll update every week on new chapters, alright? Yes? Good. Glad we came to an agreement. =u= Hope you enjoyed this one (I know I did \*pervy eyebrow wiggle\*).

-Until next time, Comrades!

LadyDynamite312~

### 3. Flawless Cowboy

Watching the ring open up in front of them was a total of three different emotions for the Spartans; exhilarating, mystifying and panic.

Cortana calculated data and brought up files for the lifeboat. "We're coming in too fast!" She concluded, already beginning estimations for how many people could possibly survive at this rate.

"Damn! Airbrake failure! They blew too early!" The pilot added in frustration, trying to work with the throttles and ease them up- all to no avail.

The nose of the lifeboat came up, speeding past the tips and branches of trees.

"I'm losing her! Brace for impact!" Was the last thing the pilot said before the lifeboat crashed.

The impact lifted the Spartans up and into the lifeboat, sending waves of pain before there was darkness.

"Chief? Lieutenant? â€|Spartans can you hear me?" Cortana's voice echoed through their helmets.

"Yes, I can hear you," the Master Chief shook his head, his vision clear again. He pressed his lips together, flexing his muscles when Cortana spoke again.

"Are you alright? Can you move?"

The Chief was confused. He was moving perfectly. He opened his mouth to speak when he saw the Lieutenant outside of the lifeboat and quickly moved out to help her. She simply shook her head and stood, sliding a hand down her arm.

"I'm fine, no need to be concerned Cortana," her voice sounded smaller than it usually was. The A.I. could tell that she had been shaken up and decided to remain quiet.

The Chief looked his comrade over carefully, checking to see whether it was true that she was fine. The Lieutenant looked up and shook her head again, snatching an assault rifle from the ground and holding it up to his helmet.

"We should hurry."

The Master Chief understood, but it gnawed at the back of his conscience how she didn't seem to show any concern for herself.

"The Lieutenant is right, Chief. The crash landing already buzzed the radio. Covenant patrols should be here any minute now," Cortana warned.

Supplies covered the ditch made by the lifeboat. The Spartans grabbed what they needed. Grenades, pistols, rifles and health packs.

The Lieutenant doubled on pistols, attaching them both to her sides. She shouldered an assault rifle, checked to see if it worked properly, and packed ammo.

The Master Chief, however, chose to keep one pistol, and still had the assault rifle that was handed to him earlier. He picked up two fragmentation grenades, tossed another two to the Lieutenant, and put a fresh clip into his rifle.

Cortana was on the alert. She kept note of any large or small mass that came within 1,000 meters of the humans. A large drop ship caught her attention. Covenant.

"Warning- I've detected multiple Covenant drop ships on approach. I recommend moving into those hills. If we're lucky, the Covenant will believe that everyone aboard the lifeboat died in the crash."

"Acknowledged." The Chief said, taking a glance around for any enemies.

"Good thinking. I've never interacted with someone who's as advanced as you are." The Lieutenant complimented. Quickly, the two-Spartan team moved across a small clearing and onto a bridge. The sight of Halo was amazing. Lush fields, crisp, clean air to breathe in—it was almost like Eden.

Cortana noticed how she said 'someone' instead of 'A.I.' "If I didn't

know any better, I would say that you're trying to be \_friendly\_ Spartan."

The Master Chief shook his head. It was odd and almost humorous how the two interacted with each other. Whether it was dry compliments or simple orders, they could make a conversation out of anything that was said.

"Alert- Covenant drop ships inbound." Cortana said in a firm voice, now concentrated on the task at hand. They needed to escape enemy patrols before they could banter.

Once they reached the end of the bridge, the two humans ran along the grass. They guessed that they hadn't been spotted yet and took the opportunity to duck behind a few large boulders. The Chief took a peek and saw the Spirit open its hatches and deliver a squad that consisted of about three Elites and ten Grunts.

Cerulean blue plasma bolts caught the Spartan's attention. They looked up to see a pair of Covenant Banshees diving towards them. The Lieutenant took a glance behind her, and then started to climb the boulder. The Chief aimed his assault rifle and waited for the target to come into focus. The Banshee did a series of smooth, graceful swoops over the humans, before finally coming straight toward them.

The Chief pulled the trigger. Bullets showered the enemy ship's hull and hit a weak point, causing smoke to trail from it. The Lieutenant stood at the top of the boulder and patiently waited for the second Banshee to make the careless mistake of getting too close. It did just as she predicted and flew in at an angle- it tried to push her up against the rock wall behind her, but she was quick and had perfect balance.

\* \* \*

><p>The Elite piloting the small, yet useful machine found that it was being forced open. Just as its head turned, it was yanked from the seat and fell to the ground. Several bones cracked, the most fatal being its head, and gave its last, bloody, gurgled breath.<p>

The Lieutenant slipped into the Banshee with ease and worked away at the controls, bringing it upwards. This wasn't her first time flying the alien aircraft. Spartan III's were most advanced with alien technology on the battlefield.

\* \* \*

><p>From below, the Master Chief looked on as the Lieutenant flew overhead. He opened a COM channel to speak to her.<p>

"Do you think you could take down the other, Lieutenant?" He asked, dodging a series of short controlled bursts from the plasma cannon.

"Done," came the simple retort as the friendly Banshee did a backflip into the air and the fuel rod guns exploded one round into its twin aircraft. It exploded into flames as a result and fell into the shimmering water below.

"Nice work." The Master Chief called. He watched as the Banshee did another series of backflips- he smiled. '\_Show off,\_' he thought.

His shields went down and flashed a crimson red as something hit him from behind. He turned and faced his attacker, then frowned and brought a foot to the Elite's chest, sending it stumbling back. Its mandibles stretched as far as possible and a loud roar left the beast.

The Chief ran forward and squeezed the trigger of his rifle, the bullets bringing down the shields of the eight-foot tall alien, but not quite penetrating its armor. The Elite hunched its back and shot a series of plasma bullets from the plasma rifle that was clutched between its claws. The Spartan II crouched and rolled, dodging every plasma threat. He came to his feet in a matter of milliseconds and fired off his rifle once more, finally bringing the alien to its end.

The Banshee exploded into one of the boulders causing the Master Chief to turn in shock. Unconsciously, he began to shake his head in utter confusion and shock. Just as he was about to give Cortana the command, someone tapped on his shoulder from behind. He whirled around, his assault rifle already aimed.

The Lieutenant tilted her head in dismay, her hands lifted to emphasize the point that she wasn't an enemy.

"Banshees are only big enough for one- and you're big enough for two. There wasn't any point in keeping it," she explained pointing at the wreckage.

The Chief lowered his weapon and nodded. He looked around, and then pointed off in the direction of a small area of grass.

"We should hurry," he mimicked the Lieutenant allowing the smallest of smiles to form. The Lieutenant shook her head in amusement and jogged off into the foreign lands.

\* \* \*

><p>Sergeant Major Avery Johnson put the first clip of the day into his MA5B assault rifle when he heard another crewman scream over the COMs: "<em>It's a drop ship! They're extracting troops! The Covenant found us!<em>"

The Sergeant huffed and moved down the ramp made of a metal he wasn't familiar with. He decided to take lead of the small lifeboat group.

"Alright Marines! You heard the man! Covenant have found our mansion on the hill and thought that it would be nice to stop by and have a play date! Get your guns ready boys- it's gonna' be one hell of a party!"

The men bellow wearing a green drab threw a fist into the air and cheered with determination, while wide grins stuck to their faces.

"Am I understood Marines?" Johnson snarled, meeting the eyes of every man before him.

"Hoo-rah!" Came the usual response and he nodded and went off to the lifeboat to hold something equivalent to a defensive perimeter.

The ring they were currently occupying gave Johnson the sense of vast emptiness and made him feel alone. It wasn't a depressing feeling, but it was odd- that much he could admit. The land reminded him all too well of Reach and Earth.

"One day I'll get back." He muttered under his breath and sprinted off in the direction the Spirit landed on the other side of the clearing.

\* \* \*

><p>The Chief paused and tilted his head upwards at the sound of gunfire—both alien and human. He looked to Six who had already had her weapons ready. With a nod of encouragement from his comrade, the Chief proceeded to the sounds of a firefight and wasn't half surprised at the scene that was displayed before his eyes: A Covenant Spirit was dropping another set of troops as the marines did their best to hold them off, but it was quite obvious that they needed assistance.<p>

Six looked to the Chief as if she had felt responsible for the chaos that was happening. He tilted his head again, this time in curiosity, but was startled when the space she had once occupied was empty and the sound of 12.7 mm bullets bursting through skull and bone. How unfortunate for the victim. Nonetheless, the Chief followed suit, mowing down any enemies that threatened his comrades.

The Lieutenant panted softly as she leaned against a tree on the far side of the camp. The sound of other lifeboats caused her to lift her head.

"Other lifeboats," Cortana confirmed over the channel. "More survivors made it off the Pillar than I predicted. We need to get to those marines before the Covenant do."

Six holstered her pistols and made her way to the pelican hovering above the ground. The Chief laid a hand on it as the Warthog was dropped. She crossed her arms and opened her mouth to ask who was driving when Cortana interrupted.

"Lieutenant, man the turret. Chief, take the wheel. We have the find those survivors. Maybe the captain made it off."

The Chief nodded off to Johnson who boarded the pelican, then frowned slightly. "We're fine, thank you."

Six raised her eyebrows. 419's thrusters started to growl and the pelican rose above the ground. She wasn't exactly sure where the pilot was taking the troops, but with a last wave to the marines, and while she received cheers and 'good luck's in return, she knew that they would be safe.

Her attention turned to the Master Chief whom held out a hand. She took it and they shook. Both Spartans grinned in amusement.

"Are you alright? Any injuries?" The Chief asked, once again giving her armor a look over.

The Lieutenant scoffed and brushed off some debris left behind after a plasma bolt had scorched his shoulder. It almost seemed like he was surprised but he kept his calm composure.

"I'm fine," she said before chuckling lightly. "But if you keep putting scars onto your armor, I think it'll put a few on \_you\_."

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen." Cortana responded for the Chief.

The Lieutenant involuntarily rolled her eyes and stepped onto the back of the 'hog, gripping the turret. "Ready and able."

"Good, I wouldn't want you to fall on something just as stubborn as you are," the Chief said in a hushed, mocking tone as he slid into the driver's seat and accelerated forward without issue. Cortana set a navigation point that lead over the hill.

He drove over it, the sight of the evergreen plants going by in a constant blur. The roar and vibration of the engine made the Lieutenant smile. She thought back to when she first drove a Warthog serving with Noble Teamâ€|

\* \* \*

><p><em>The pelican flies over, its 'present' in tow, and drops it onto the ground. The back hatchet hisses open and a single marine steps out moving to stand next to the Rock 'Hog, as Emile would call it. Kat nods as she finishes her conversation with Carter about the setup of the enemy forces. She walks to the driver seat, causing the Lieutenant to drop her grenade launcher. <em>

\_Kat turns back, clearly puzzled, and tilts her head. "Are you alright, Six?" \_

\_Six sighs and flings out her arms in exasperation, picking up her weapon and giving it to the marine who just gapes and nods his thanks. \_

"\_Insubordination be damned, you are \_not\_ driving again. Concussions aren't exactly pleasant, Two." \_

"\_If you had held on, like I told you to, we wouldn't be talking about this right now, now would we?" Kat snorted humorlessly and decided to take the gun in the back instead. Six and the marine followed suit, as she took the wheel. \_

"\_I did. It was just your lack of steering-â€|I'll need you to navigate, please." \_

\_The marine nodded and started pushing away at the buttons displayed on the screen. "Yes, ma'am, I'll get right on it ma'am." \_

"\_Point is," Six continued as the 'Hog hovered over the crumbled mess of what once had been a bridge, and then landed into the heap of



dirt. "That-"\_

"\_You should appreciate my skill with the wheel instead of doubt it. We survived didn't we?"\_

\_The Lieutenant's mouth quirked and tightenedâ€"damn Kat for being right. "I supposeâ€"|"\_"

"\_You suppose?"\_

\_Another sigh. "We survived." \_

"\_Then you should be grateful. If it weren't for me, you would have been floating down a river by now." \_

"\_If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be imagining this god damn Revenant." \_

"â€"|"\_.That isn't your imagination, Lieutenant."\_

"\_Oh...well, I'm sure I'll do better than you at dodging it."\_

"\_Hmph. I doubt that, very much."\_

"\_You doubt everything I do, \_very\_ much."

\_

"\_True."\_

"â€"|" "

"\_Lieutenant?"\_

"\_Yes?"\_

"\_You're a good addition to the team."\_

\_A smirk rises onto her scarred lips.\_

"\_Don't get cocky; I heard what Jorge said to you on the roof. I need you to stay focused."\_

"\_Cocky isn't my style, Two. Well, not around anyone else, besides Jorge."\_

"\_Keep telling yourself that."\_

\* \* \*

><p>The Spartan III didn't realize she was grinning like a fool, until the Master Chief spoke up.<p>

"Are you alright Lieutenant?"

312 shook her quickly then nodded. "Ready and able," she repeated.

Cortana wasn't fooled and she wouldn't let that go so easily. But the sight of the cave up ahead prevented her from confronting the woman

at the gun about anything. After analyzing it, she was shocked to find that it wasn't naturally made. Someone purposely created it for some reason and they were going to find out why. After telling the Spartans this, she continued to piece together what she could from scanning the different metals and minerals.

The Chief made a sharp right turn, causing him to almost hit the wall. "Damn it!" He bit his lip in concentration. It was annoying how narrow the hallways were, as if its creator (or creators) expected only sticks to fit through. '\_This is really annoying.\_' The Lieutenant was clinging to the 50-cal for dear life.

"I thought you knew how to drive!" She hissed between her teeth as John made another sharp turn.

"I do, it's just these halls are making my skills look bad," he defended and was happy to find that they drove into a much more open space—"happy, until he saw the crimson circles on his radar. "Enemies at 2 and 10 o'clock."

"I see them. Turret's heating up now." The Lieutenant pointed the nose of the 50-cal at the sad bastard who stepped out behind the first minute structure and fired. The bullets hit the Grunt and broke the methane tanks sending him hurdling into a Jackal.

The Chief spun the Warthog one-hundred eighty degrees giving the Lieutenant a better angle at the aliens between the rectangular shaped walls. The Lieutenant concentrated her fire on the Elites and Jackals, targeting them and putting them to their end. The Grunts ran wild and hollered and barked.

The Lieutenant tapped on the turret and Chief slowed it down just slightly, giving her enough time to jump out of the 'Hog, flip in mid-air, and land on her feet, pistols drawn and shots being fired. She started to stride through the structures, when something from the corner of her eye caught her attention. The Lieutenant paused and turned, thinking it was the Master Chief. When the familiar drab green armor didn't appear her eyes narrowed.

The Chief drove under a large frame that barely grazed the ceiling. He put his heavy boot on the brake. There wasn't a bridge. Damn. "Cortana, is there another route that across this room?"

"I'm afraid not," the A.I. responded. "However, there is a panel that can be activated, off to your right." The Spartan II looked up and right and nodded. He jumped out of the 'Hog only to see the Lieutenant dodge a plasma blade.

Her feet skidded across the metal and gave her the leverage to propel upwards. She didn't waste time and took the opportunity, while drawing her combat knife. She slammed into the Elite, her rewarding result a roar of outrage as they both fell to the ground. Her vision blurred for a moment and out of focus she could make out the Chief approaching her. The Lieutenant sat up, surprised that the Elite hadn't taken her moment of weakness to kill.

When she saw what happened, she froze. This wasn't like her—"she never hesitated around the Covenant, not when they died or were dying. She just pulled the trigger and moved onto to the next. But there something about seeing that expression in the Elite's eyes,

that look of no fear or shame. It wasâ€¦it was acceptance. Acceptance that he lost this battle.

It continued to snarl in a low tone, defensive, but not threatening. The Lieutenant stood and as she drew her pistol, nodded in respect. The Elite's eyes pulsed with a fireâ€”one she had seen in Jorge's eyes. It waited, unwilling to move because of the energy blade that kept it pinned to the floor.

The scope was aimed at the heart, not the head. Before she pulled the trigger though, its mandibles flared. She paused and the fire that once pulsed had begun to dim. The Lieutenant pulled the trigger. She moved past the alien and walked with the Chief up a ramp and towards the panel that Cortana had set the Nav. Point.

"What does this do?" The female asked, her hand hovering over controls that made absolutely no sense to her whatsoever. There wasn't any available translation, which wasn't surprising to her.

"This panel activates the controls to the bridge. It's the only way across." Cortana responded politely.

The Lieutenant nodded. But when nothing else was said, she turned to look at the Chief whom was staring at her intently. Her eyebrows rose. "Do you expect me to activateâ€¦this? I'm not exactly familiarâ€”"

"You do have the magic touch, Lieutenant and between you and the Master Chief, you have the most experience with non-human technology."

Sighing and shaking her head in mock disappointment (it never failed to amaze her how much people knew about the Spartan III, regardless of black ink). She pushed a swirling green button with golden rectangles that looked like it was keeping the circle in place. The rectangles moved horizontally and a glowing blue light appeared in front of them.

"Wellâ€¦it seems you have lighted our path." Cortana murmured with the smirk that played on her artificial lips easily heard.

The Spartans exchanged brief looks. They made their way down to the Warthog and took their places once more. The vehicle accelerated forward, pushing them towards their next destination. This ring, this \_Halo\_, was more than what they thought they were going to find.

And this was Heaven compared to what Hell they were going to fly face first into.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Note:<strong> Wow, that's a lot to read in one day! Jeez! D: Anywhooooo! I need a week to freshen my brain a bit and continue to writing, editing, etc...yadda, yadda, yadda. =A=

Until next Monday, my Ugly Mug of Aliens! :D See ya!

-LadyDynamite312

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UPDATE, UPDATE AS OF 7.5.12: <strong>For those of you whom are keeping an eye on my story, I may not be able to post on Monday but instead Tuesday because of the fact that I'm moving into a new house starting tomorrow. I don't how long it'll take for the internet to be reestablished, but I'm online today and most likely some of tomorrow. I have a phone, so you still PM me about anything. Sorry for short notice. Hope you had a wonderful 4th!

#### 4. Reunion Tour

\_"When I joined the Corps, we didn't have any fancy-schmanzy tanks. We had sticks! Two sticks, and a rock for the whole platoon!"and we had to share the rock! Buck up, boy, you are one very lucky marine!\_"  
-Sergeant Avery Jr. Johnson (Halo 2)

\* \* \*

><p>Captain Jacob Keyes squinted as his eyes worked to adjust to the amethyst light. The sound of low growls seeped into his ears making him involuntarily flinch. He shook slightly as he sat up and looked around at his surroundings. <em>They're holding me at a ship! I wonder if I'm still in orbit!</em>

\* \* \*

><p>The Royal guard shook his head angrily. "These humans have put their filthy footsteps on god <em>Halo</em>! The gods will become angry and who is to take punishment? Our heads! We should not waste time now. The human in the cell is the leader; he holds knowledge of value. Why not take it for ourselves and kill off the humans as a last effort? We will be everlasting heroes for our people!"\_AGH!\_"

The elite was knocked off of his feet with a single slap to the face. His cobalt eyes widened to the point where they looked almost laughable. Almost. A higher ranking official growled, his mandibles stretching with the vibration of the sound. He looked at the soldiers before him and became completely silent before beginning to slowly pace back and forth. "You have spat on the name of the \_Prophets\_, the name of this \_ship\_, and the name of \_your brethren\_. You disrespected Sangheilios and the Sangheili. For that, you will be punished."

The guard opened his mandibles in a terrified display as he tried to reason with the male before him. Roaring, the elite field commander!"Rvas!"signaled for his men to come and take the 'traitor' away. With the heretic gone from his sights, Rvas stepped towards the human leader.

\* \* \*

><p>Keyes placed a hand on his head. The man's body was sore beyond belief and the migraine that consistently pounded through his head added to his distress. His breath hitched as the familiar silhouette of an elite approached him. It wore lustrous tawny armor with electric cyan lights pulsing through the head piece. The pair of holstered energy swords is what caught his attention the

most.<p>

The elite stepped forward, chin tilted upwards as if he was demanding respect. The human coughed to cover his laughterâ€”it made the beast look like nothing more than a mere child. But he knew better. He never underestimated an enemy. That was against his own rules, not just the Navy's.

"Human captain," it began, then paused. Keyes blinked and struggled to sit up properly.

"What is it that you want?" He replied in a gruff voice. It took all of his energy just to mutter a mere six words, but he hurt so god damned muchâ€”\_No. Quit your whining, soldier. You will not succumb to the enemy just because of a belly ache.\_

"I demand the location of the demons." The shield to his cage shimmered and faded. The elite stepped through, arms crossed over his chest. The cobalt eyes didn't match with his dress wear or his attitude. It was too soft. "And the location of your filthy \_planet\_."

Jacob Keyes cracked a smile. A real smile. He knew the elites weren't ones for patience. But Keyes would die any day for those soldiersâ€”no. Not just soldiers, but people. They were people too; they deserved to be treated as such. It was going to take more than a snobby split-jaw to make him give valuable knowledge. "I'm not telling you anything. You'll have to kill me first."

\* \* \*

><p>Rvas growled and clenched his fists in fury. He was tempted to just rip the skin from his face and watch the human bleed to death. But his superiors demanded otherwise. He turned to a lower ranking Grunt sitting on the ground and huffed to get his attention. It gave a soft, startled squeal and hobbled over to its leader. "Bring the instruments. This <em>human</em>," he emphasized the word by nodding his head towards the captain. "Is not willing to comply. We will \_make\_ him do as such."

The commander turned back, expecting the human to crumble like the others he had interrogated before. He expected him to fall to his knees and beg for mercy, beg for anything, but harsh treatment. It was that feelingâ€”watching their faces contort and change when they realized there was no hopeâ€”that made him grin in triumph.

Keyes carelessly shrugged off the elite's threat. He meant what he had said; he would die before he gave up his own planet or betrayed his fellow soldiers. He was a man of his word and he intended to stay that way. "Do what you like. But I'm a soldier. I defend my planet until my last dying breath, and not even then will I stop. You bastards can burn in hell."

And with that, Rvas stepped forward, bringing his hand across the human's brittle face with an incredible force, leaving three cardinal marks in its wake.

\* \* \*

><p>"New traffic on the Covenant Battlenetâ€”a lot more crew made it

off the <em>Autumn</em> than I had predictedâ€”the Captain really gave them hell! If we can find Captain Keyes and other survivors, we have a chance to coordinate an effective resistance," Cortana said proudly as she started to trace the lifeboat beacon locations and kept the Battlenet at a bay; distant enough so she couldn't be distracted by it, but distant enough so she would be alerted if anything particularly interesting came into sights.

The Lieutenant hummed her approval and the Chief remained silent as they exited the cave and drove out onto a small stretch of land peppered with hills. He slowed the 'Hog to a stop and leaned back into his seat as Cortana placed a NAV point on each lifeboat. There were a total of three and one of them was just over the small body of water that came into view.

LT rolled her neck, pondering what the \_Pillar of Autumn\_'s crew next move would be. "So, are we infiltrating one of the ships you took down or are we going to try to fix the ship first and move on from there \_or\_ do you have something else in mind?"

Cortana paused and considered the two options, but scolded the first with her own reply: "Do you really think that infiltrating an enemy ship is the best strategy for us?"

A low grumble came from the Spartan. "I'm just throwing suggestions here. Maybe they have something we could use; something of value. Then before you know it, we have an edge against the Covenant."

John's eyes drifted to his radar, saw two large crimson red flashing triangles heading their way from behind, then looked back to the body of water. He froze in his seat, instincts taking over as he gripped the wheel and stomped on the gas pedal, the 'Hog jolting forward as a result.

"Banshees," he muttered harshly under his breathing, \_knowing\_ the Lieutenant would hear him as the oversized jeep escalated up the hill and hovered over land for milliseconds before compressing with it again.

The two women continued to argue however and the Chief sighed heavily, deciding to let it go. "\_Banshees\_," his voice raised an octave higher so his comrade would hear him this time. All to no avail. \_Of course notâ€”|But desperate times call for desperate measures. \_

The LT gawked as Cortana finished talking. Retreat? Did she honestly think \_that\_ was the best plan? "Cortana, I disagree, retreating and leaving our asses open like that, it just isn't right; we'll just be hanging around in space until we get through the other sideâ€”" She yelped mid-sentence as the Chief fought to keep the 'Hog steady even as the Banshee vomited one of the fuel rods into the side of the vehicle.

The Lieutenant, the Chief, and the 'Hog went tumbling into the air at high speed. John hit the stone wall, groaning in pain as he stood and found cover behind a boulder. The Lieutenant wasn't as lucky; she flew with the Warthog and had landed \_under\_ it. Sighing as he looked at the Banshees, the Chief decided to leave her there for the moment and take care of his enemies first. Running to the jeep blindly like

that would attract their attention and 312 would be lost. He couldn't take that chance. Just as he was about to start shooting, Cortana chose the worst moment to speak.

"Her vitals are there, she's alive, but she's injured. I've display them on your HUD screen for reference," she said in a tone that made his eye twitch slightly.

\* \* \*

><p>Suddenly, it was like she had returned to Reach. She opened her eyes and a sound she had never heard herself make escaped her lips. What the hell was that? She realized with annoyance it was a whimper and growled trying to pry herself off of the ground. But she couldn't because of the hulking mass sitting on top of her. <em>Damn it.</em> Coughing, Six crawled out from the large mass and gripped the side of the 'Hog. With a grunt, she pulled it onto all fours and grinned as the one of the Banshees descended and made its way to her. \_Good you sick bastards. Come and get it. \_

Just as the Chief squeezed his trigger and the bullets left his rifle, his sensitive hearing picked up the whirring of the Warthog's turret before the all too familiar \_cling! cling! cling! \_of bullets hitting Covenant aircraft followed. He smiled and ducked behind the rock to put in a fresh magazine.

"Injuries?" He asked over the COM.

"I would say none, but I know that would just put you into an unnecessary state of worry. Everything is minor or is too insignificant to make a fuss overâ€|Sir." He gave a soft snort and emptied two clips into the Banshee that glided through the sky. Trails of smoke immediately left it. Flames suddenly flared on the wings and the Lieutenant nodded in approval as it exploded, moving her attention to the next enemy.

"Sierra seventeen, I think we should split up. That way we can cover more ground and the Covenant can't take as many survivors as they would like to," she offered as the Banshee ignored her and advanced on the Master Chief. \_I tried to help you, but your funeral buddy, \_she thought hastily.

The Chief narrowed his eyes, pulling a plasma grenade then setting it and tossing it onto the hood of the craft. It stuck to it no matter how much the pilot jerked it from left to right. The Lieutenant sighed and leaned on the turret as the oddly gas appearance of the grenade blew and destroyed the Banshee in one fire-like explosion.

As debris fell around the two Spartans, the Chief made his way to the Warthog, and leaned on the left side. "I don't think that will work. There's only one 'Hog." He looked up at her only to see the female shake her head in slight disappointment. "I don't need it. Besides, I move quicker on my own than with thisâ€|" She nudged the turret with her foot to emphasize her point. "â€|And I'll have the element of surprise while you draw some of their attention."

He rolled his neck and set a hand on the top of the jeep, then hauled himself inside. "So we'll draw enemy fire on us, possibly risking the lives of the survivors, while you risk going into unknown territory

with no back up and try to infiltrate the enemy. Am I about right?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said in the most polite tone she could muster from deep within and leapt off of the horse. She approached the driver's seat and set a hand on the Chief's shoulder. "The Marines are my back up. Regarding the beacons though, I think you should head there, deep into the land structure." She pointed to the second beacon that was displayed on both of their HUDs. "I'm going to take care of the two over here." She pointed across the river, then pressed her fist into his shoulder and took off, pistols in hand. He shook his head and did the same, the 'Hog growling with content as he raced across the hills.

\* \* \*

><p>The Lieutenant paused at the layout of the scene before her. It was a cliffside with similar structures that they found with the first batch of survivors they had rescued. But there were several differences; there was the cliff and the water that lapped at the wall far off north from the structures, and then, lastly, there was a smaller building with an opening. It didn't stretch so she figured it went underground. Jackals and Grunts stood at the opening intently focused as their eyes wandered to capture every minute detail. LT picked up the sniper rifle she had found at one of the lifeboats and zoomed in near the entrance. She could see where the lifeboat had landed not too far from it. Bright red flickered in the light of what she assumed to be a sun and soon her blank expression turned into a deep grimace. That was unacceptable.<p>

Turning on the private channel that was connected between herself and the Chief, she gave a light report: "I'm at the entrance to the site of the first life boat beacon. There's a small building that I believe leads underground with a few guards." She swung the rifle around towards a small tower to her right. "From what I can see, I think they're trying to flush out the remaining marines; if there are still Elites out here, then they must be giving a good fightâ€|but there's blood on the ground. I'm going to move in on the Elites and take them out, then lead the marines out from their hiding spot. Stand by for my signal to radio four nineteen."

"Acknowledged Lieutenant," answered the synthetic voice of the digital companion. Cortana paused for a mere second as she kept the radio signal in sights, but off. To keep herself busy, she decided to report on their progress as well. "We've found marines near a rock slide and are engaging enemies as I speak. I estimate more reinforcements will arrive soon to our location."

Sierra 312 moved against the rock wallâ€"both assault and sniper rifle strapped to her backâ€"moving towards the tower where three elites grumbled and muttered things to each other, slouching against the little cover that existed there. She narrowed her eyes and pulled her sniper from her back, the first low ranking creature coming into her crosshairs. Her whole body was still and unseen; the shade from the trees not too far off from her nest blended in with the ebony of the standard MARK V [B] armor. Her eyes widened as she dropped to one knee, body tight as a coil ready to spring; she lived up to her expectation of being of a lone wolf. Teeth ground together, the sound similar to a saw meeting granite or stone. The rifle was muzzled down with a silencer, the work of the female holding it. Her fingers



ghosted over the eye piece, then slid slower farther along to remain at the barrel. The right hand was secure under it, index finger settled into the crook of the trigger. She'd only have about fifteen seconds to take down each. If one of the Elites gave off of a sound, the Grunts and Jackals would most likely storm the underground and she knew for a fact that the marines didn't stand a chance against chaotic, grenade happy midgets.

"Understood Cortana, signal when you're ready." Her radar caught the large red dot as it soared somewhere behind the rock. The Lieutenant chuckled softly. He had a way of catching people's attention. "Enemy drop ship is advancing on your position. Acknowledge?"

The Chief took the liberty to answer her instead. "Drop ship encountered. The warning is appreciated."

"I'm sure it is, Chief."

He grinned and let one of his eyebrows dip in curiosity. "Has the enemy beenâ€" "

\* \* \*

><p>She exhaled slowly, interrupting him, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet shot straight through the skull of the Elite making her lips twitch just slightly. Saving the rounds Jun had given her proved to be useful. She momentarily wondered what happened to both her comrade and Dr. Halsey as her crosshairs closed in on the second Elite. He was barely able to take in the scene of his dead brother before dropping to floor as well, gurgling as rich, violet blood spilled between mandibles. The last alien, wearing auburn colored armor snarled and had turned to call for back up just as the Lieutenant pulled her trigger; the bullet caught the bastard between the eyes and she knew that Emile would be proudâ€"it had been his favorite part of the body to stab an Elite.<p>

Three shots were fired and three enemies had fallen. She paused and took her time as she scanned the area. She knew Jackals had a high sense of hearing. Fortunately, they hadn't heard her massacre take place. On the other hand, the Elites standing at the largest tower in the area had seen her within the shadow of the tree. One extended its arm, giving a roar, the pulsing cyan on the energy sword appeared. \_Close enough\_, the Lieutenant snarled in her head as she secured the sniper rifle and pulled her assault rifle and pistol. She had to save those marines, even if it cost her her own life.

She slid down the hill she had taken cover on and sprinted towards the watch tower. Her radar tracked the movements of the incoming eight foot tall beasts and at that moment, she couldn't care less. One simple phrase resounded through her mind like a prayer: \_Save those men, save those men, save those menâ€"\_|\_ She passed the odd tubes that served as a wall and she saw a small opening in the tower. Relief washed over the Spartan as she ran inside, jogging down the ramp and making a sharp left. She almost ran over the ODS that stood before her in the open room.

"HOLY SHIT! You god damned scared the crap out of me! \_Shit!\_ You're like a black bandit or banshee or some shit and Iâ€"|Iâ€"|" The Helljumper trailed off as he stared at the Spartan before him then shook his head and held out his shotgun. "Give me the assault rifle

and take this. I'll provide cover. The other marines died. All that's left is staff and although they can wield a pistolâ€¦" He trailed off and clucked his tongue. "Anyway! I happened to have some mines with me when we jumped off the old horse and I have it set up at the other entrance. That's why they haven't made a move yet. They think that most of us are dead and that they can wait us out. Patient Covie bastards; never thought I would see the day." The male scratched the back of his helmet, then shrugged casually and hid behind one of the two pillars; he signaled for the Lieutenant to do the same.

She blinked and shook her head getting into cover. When he signaled again, she narrowed her eyes in confusion and he held up his shotgun in response. \_Right, he said the shotgun would work best.\_ Dropping her rifle to the floor, she brought up the back of her heel and kicked it across to him. He shook his head in approval and mimicked her action with his shotgun. They took hold of their weapons and aimed at the opening.

\* \* \*

><p>Setting up a private COM link between them, Valor grinned. He couldn't help but feel giddy about this Spartan; and from the curve of the under suit, he could tell that it was <em>female<em>; all the more reason for him to be hopelessly happy. He sighed softly and watched his radar, the large crimson dots approaching with caution. Patience may have been an aspect for the Covie's, but he didn't view it as a virtue for himself. Valor looked over the Spartan once more and the grin returned. \_She's terribly blessed with beauty and the bastard doesn't even know it\_, he growled in his head and shifted once.

"My name is Valor, by the way." He paused and considered something for a moment. "You have a name Spartan?"

He watched as she tilted her head this way and that, as if weighing her words out. "No," she murmured and froze as the Elites transcended into the room. Valor frowned and pulled his trigger. "Enemies engaged!" He shouted.

The leader growled and brought an arm over its eyes as its shields rippled from the bullets. Valor continued his onslaught, chuckling darkly over the radio. "Valor, keep dwindling his shields, I'm moving in." The Helljumper nodded as he caught sight of the ebony blur in his peripheral vision. The blur moved towards the Elite behind the leader and Valor watched as it snarled angrily, the shotgun blast ringing its ears, blood and flesh spraying out from its back like a grenade detonated in its stomach. His grin widened until his whole damn face hurt. He couldn't help it. She was so graceful and lethal; he couldn't help but cackle at the way she moved. The leader turned its energy sword and waved it at the Lieutenant menacingly. Valor snarled between his teeth. Stepping from behind his cover, he emptied the rest of his clip into the attacker, then swore under his breath as he reloaded with a fresh one.

The Lieutenant ducked as the alien aimed for her head with the sword and terribly missed thanks to the work of the ODST. She smiled a little and dropped down, balancing on the balls of her feet for a few heartbeats as the leader turned again and moved to attack the other human. She sprang, like a cat pouncing on its prey and gripped the Elite's throat, muttering something incoherent under her breath as

she pulled back with all of her weight and strength.

He watched her, eyes dancing over her form as she pulled back on the eight foot beast. The way she moves, he mused and pulled the knife from his chest piece, running forward as he howled a battle cry and jumped to slice the Covenant bastard across the throat. It screamed in agony as the Lieutenant did the same, bringing her own blade across the back of its neck. It staggered as its eyes rolled to the back of its head, the warrior meeting his fate. Just as it began to sway backwards, the Spartan gracefully jumped off, returned her kukri to its holster, and secured the shotgun to her back all in one fluid motion. Valor gave a low whistle, clearly impressed and leaned back against the pillar, watching the Elite hit the ground. He turned his attention to the Spartan and nodded, extending his hand politely.

"I didn't properly introduce myself. Warrant Officer Valor, pleased to meet you, Missâ€|?" She took his handâ€"much to his surpriseâ€"and firmly, but gently gave it a squeeze. Her shoulders rolled this way and that as she pondered what she wanted to say. He admired that about her; she thought about what she said before she said it. He could never possess such an ability.

She gave in and nodded. "Spartan B-312 Noâ€" Swallowing down what her heart wanted to say, she let her mind take over. "Rank of Lieutenant; I don't have a name and my call sign is Sierra 312." Her eyes carefully scanned his helmet as he stretched his arms a bit. "Well, I guess I'll give you a name," he concluded and she could hear the grin in his reply. Valor brought up his gloved index finger and titled his head towards the ceiling. "Let's seeâ€|what should I name youâ€|?"

Behind him, the Lieutenant watched as the staff of the Pillar, shuddering in terror, crossed the glass bridge and scurried to their position. One man in a red uniform with bright, glazed eyes bit his lip and looked at the Helljumper. "Heyâ€|the aliens are coming down here! You have to blow this thing!" Grumbling in annoyance, Valor gave a growl of agreement and pulled a remote device from his pouch; he held it up for all of them to see. "Alright then," he muttered, a humorless smile stretching onto his rather handsome features. "Let's blow this popsicle stand."

\* \* \*

><p>The Chief sighed and crossed his arms, taking in the damage. Much to his fortunate astonishment, only one man had died and there were two with injuries. He grinned as he opened his radio channel. "Sierra three-one-two, this is Sierra one-one-seven, marines from life boat beacon three are found; three casualtiesâ€"we have one man down and two injured. Requesting a stat-report on your situation withâ€" An explosion echoed over the radio and all of the remaining marines turned their heads to the Spartan, mouths hung open in a display of shock. The Chief stood there, motionless, even as Foe Hammer touched down and asked him in a diminutive voice to get on.<p>

He looked back at the Pelican; he felt reluctant to go and he felt as if this was somehow his fault. He frowned and looked at the grass he stood on. Why wasn't there any static? Shouldn't there be static? A soft, yet psychotic chuckle seeped into his ears like sap slipping into the bark of a tree. "Does it hurt?" Her words made him raise an eyebrow in question and he licked his dry lips.

"No, I don't believe I was injured. You had me for a second there." He heard the marines behind him laugh and cheer, including Foe Hammer herself. Chief just shook his head and grinned as he stepped onto the bird. "Sorry about that. Valor set off some minesâ€¦|Not that it wasn't fun, butâ€¦|yeah." Loud laughter that sounded more like an old dog barking made Chief wince from how high the octave was. Foe Hammer lifted off with a select choice of wordsâ€¦|"Request pick up for a few survivors, one unstable bomb specialist, and one Spartan!"â€¦as she flew towards the Lieutenant's location. \_It's beautiful\_, Chief thought as the strange world passed around and under him. The bird landed near the edge of a cliff that descended into raging cerulean water.

Emerging from the largest tower the men and woman walked down the ramp and towards the Pelican. The ODSI caught John's eye and he predicted this was Valor. The man in question took off his helmet, displaying a boorish grin. His skin was tanned and he possessed several scars, one of which going across the bridge of his nose, another marring the flesh of both of his upper/bottom lips. Hazel eyes swirled with the thirst for blood, his chestnut buzz cut adding to his violent presence. Valor turned and looked over his shoulder at the Spartan behind him. The Lieutenant rolled her neck and patted his head as she passed him by and onto the Pelican. As everyone boarded (including Valor) Foe Hammer lifted off and soared her bird through the sky to Base Camp.

Cortana hummed as she searched the Covenant Battlenet, then scolded as she found a new piece of information. "I have new Intel from the Battlenet; I've picked up reports that the Covenant have located and secured the Pillar of Autumn's crash site. The good news is the Captain's still alive. The bad news is that the Covenant has captured the entire surviving command crew. We should link up with the surviving crew and figure out our next steps."

The Lieutenant yawned softly and decided to sit on the door of the ship, fiddling with her pistol. "That's easy, Cortana. We need to set up an infiltration team and find the Captain and crew. Can you find the location of the ship he's on?"

"Affirmative, Lieutenant, location found," the A.I. retorted after a moment of searching. "Good," the Spartan continued, swinging her feet back and forth like a child. "We'll need to speak to whoever is remaining and discuss the plan. Sergeant Johnson was there in the first life boat we encountered, right?" She looked up at the Chief who nodded in response. "Okay, that's good. If this is infiltration, I suggest we strike at night and take the Sergeant with us if possible. His skills with the rifle are beyond good."

Valor quirked a brow and stood clearing his throat to get the Spartans attention. All eyes moved to his figure. "Uhâ€¦|I've been trained with Recon before, ma'am. Permission to accompany on retrieval op?"

There was an exchange of glances between the Spartans before John nodded, as did the Lieutenant. "Permission granted," she murmured and turned back to the water below. Valor grinned and chuckled as he eased back into his seat, the happiest he had felt since they left Reach, if his first confrontation with the female Spartan wasn't counted. "It's agreed then," he turned to look at the back of her

helmet as she spoke. "We're going to find the Captain \_and\_ the crew and get them the hell off of that ship." Everyone either nodded or gave soft murmurs of approval. She smiled and looked up at the Chief, tilting her head just slightly. "Are you in?" She held out a fist.

Chief searched the visor, as if he would be able to see her face. Her courage, her undeniable honor to her fellow marines no matter who they were—it was nothing short of amazing. He respected her and she in turn gave the same respect to him. Now all she asked was for him to trust her as she led them to their Captain, trust her to lead them into hell. He made a fist and bumped it against hers. "I already am," he responded coolly and for the first time in a long time, he felt a little human.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Note:<strong> DUDE. I LOVE VALOR. GAH. I was just thinking about the ODSs and shit and I was like...GAWWWW! EMILE, WHY'D YOU HAVE TO DIE BITCH? And with a startling realization I was like: BUNGIE. \*EYE TWITCH.\*

Anywho. I created Valor, because a part of me really wanted him in there. He's just this ODS who loves the fight (like Emile), wants the Covenant dead (like Emile), and thinks that the Lieutenant is a hot piece of ass (like...Emile? O.o). Nothing wrong with that, right? DAMN STRAIGHT. IT'S MY STORY BITCH. xD Seriously though, I really liked the sound of it. Um..also! That whole thing where the Lieutenant was like 'Does it hurt?', I actually stole that from her Firefight voice! :D Yes peeps, it's true. There are extremely rare moments when you can hear the Lieutenant laugh, or say that phrase while giving some mentally unstable laughter (which I love by the way~). Bloop, bloop, bloop...Also, I would like to thank ALL of you who have been giving me such wonderful comments on my story. You warm my heart and I absolutely love you, okay? Ain't a damn thing you can do about it~.

Last, but not least, thank you to Marty and Mike, the composers whom had stuck with Halo FOREVER (seriously, like...since Halo first came out in 1500 BC with Jesus and all that...) Their music gives me inspiration while I write and, forever I will love them. Forever.

OH. Almost forgot! I have a poll I want to do :O I will eventually start to write another story in the future (maybe, if you guys like this one) talking about ODS and SPARTAN interaction. It MAY include Valor, IF he survives the Battle of Installation 04. :] I'm cruel aren't I?

So here's the options, and just PM or review which one you like best for a cover for the story- I want \_you\_ to decide.

1.) . /tumblr\_ln4l0d0xPd1qgwvtiol\_

2.) . /tumblr\_lvmosmlUXj1qgwvtiol\_

3.) fs71/i/2010/244/e/7/halo\_odst\_by\_

Again, thank you all so much. You don't know how much it means to me to know that people out there are reading this and that they enjoy

it. Thank you so much. Next chapter next Tuesday, my dears~.

With unstoppable, unhealthy, and unstable love for her fans,

-LadyDynamite312

## 5. Into the Belly of the Beast

"Folks need heroes chief, to give 'em hope, so smile would ya', while we still got something to smile about!"\_ â€"Sergeant Avery Jr. Johnson (Halo 2)

**\*\*Author's Note:\*\*** This chapter is dedicated to a wonderfully fellow writer I know: DantesClover. Thank you, so much. You really gave me some inspiration for this chapter and I dedicate it to you. All of my super Halo dweebs should check out his profile! He has a really interesting story going for him. And Teen Titan fans; he has some sweetly geek-tastic stories for that too. Enjoy~. Just as a suggestion, you should listen to 'Bits and Pieces' in the Halo 3 ODSB soundtrack. Really suites the mood of this chapter. And, hey, that song is really fucking sexy.

\* \* \*

><p>Nicholas Valor grumbled, the sound coming from the deep pit of his stomach and vibrating like a rattle snakes' tail at his throat. He leaned against a boulder, and sent a quick prayer to whatever god that listened to someone like him, that said boulder wouldn't slip or decide to roll forward and crush him. He eventually slid down it, his arms going behind his head and he smiled letting his mind drift into a comfortable state of nothing but black. That was until he heard the crunching of boots in gravel. Valor's throat started to vibrate and shake as he growled and let one of his eyes open. In front of him stood none other than Sergeant Johnson and that made him stand up (which took him quite some time) and lazily give a salute. The dark skinned man just sighed and shook his head, his arms crossing over his chest. "I can't understand you for the life of me, boy. You were so damn enthusiastic about this mission." Johnson raised a hand and gaped at the sky with wide eyes. "Ooh, ooh! I've trained with Recon before!" He squealed in his best high pitched voice. Valor winced at the sound; it was like taking a jagged piece of metal and grinding it against the driest material ever known to man.<p>

"Yeah, joke all you want Serge. 'Sides, you can't blame a man for wanting to catch at least a few winks before he runs face first into enemy territory. Then I'll have something nice to think of while I'm losing blood on the sidelines." When Johnson huffed and leaned against the boulder to the left of Valor, the ODSB held up his hands. "Of course, it's not that you're not nice sir. You do, after all, have the prettiest eyes that I've ever witnessed, if I do say so myself." Johnson finally gave in and barked out a laugh before glancing at the Officer.

"Just be ready, boy. I don't think you understand just how deep in shit we'll be," he replied in a voice so soft, Valor was almost convinced that it was concern that ringed through his ears. The Sergeant brought up his leg, setting it against the rock behind him and used it to push himself off. He started to walk, turning back to

give his last words to the Officer: "Yeah, well, let's hope that your sissy crimson red blood doesn't ruin the purple and blue color scheme of our friends, hm? Wouldn't want to them get angry and try to eat youâ€|. On second thought, maybe you should go through with that! In fact, I'll be the first to shoot you, princess; my gift to you." Almost, Valor reminded himself as he flicked his wrist in the direction of Johnson dismissively. "Whatever you say, pazzo," he murmured even though Johnson was out of earshot.

He couldn't sleep now that the Sergeant had crept into his mind, so instead he took comfort in adjusting and readjusting his shotgun. His mind wandered off to a time that wasn't so damn hecticâ€|he remembered her; she was fierce, sure in herself and her teammates, and she was sure of him. The last part made him grin. Nick always grinned because she made him promise on her last breathâ€|"a breath she could have saved instead of wasted on himâ€|"to keep smiling because it's just so 'damn ugly, those Covenant bastards will drop their guns and run'. Sighing softly, he looked to the sky, wondering if she even believed in a god, wondering if she was alrightâ€|"if the place she was in now was nice and warm like the good book always said. That woman definitely made him trip in the battle field a few times. A grin weakly tugged at his lips, like it was testing if he truly meant it. "You know I don't," he whispered and he wasn't sure if he was talking to himself, to herâ€|or, hell, maybe he was talking to God.

"Valor," a solid voice that he knew oh-so well called and his head snapped up. He was a dogâ€|"no, her dog and he couldn't care less. He didn't give a damn; anytime she called for him, he would answer.

The man stood and left his place on the boulder looking up at that Spartan, giving a respectful salute. "Ma'am!" She nodded, so he stood at ease, but kept his posture straight. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

LT smiled a bit behind her helmet and lifted the case that was in her hand the entire time. The Helljumper was startled by this, then felt the blood run to his cheeks when he realized he had been staring at her helmet the entire time. He had the sneaking suspicion that she knew and was attempting to provoke him. A smile stretched its way onto his painfully dry lips. She tilted her head to the side and balanced the case onto one arm, taking one slim finger and pulling the brandished, gold locks open. It eased upward on its own and in the dying light of the ring-world, a silenced DMR shined proudly. His mouth hung open at the sight, his hands ghosting over the weapon, but never daring to touch it. His only response for what seemed like an eternity was a low whistle. "Shitâ€|permission to ask just where the hell you keep this kind of stuff, ma'am." There was a slight raising and falling of her arms. "Major Silva," he involuntarily winced at the name. "â€|Suggested that this would be the weapon most suitable for your talents."

He huffed in mock amusement and turned his head the other way, gloved hands moving away from the rifle and dropping to the sides of the man. "Permission to speak freely, ma'am?" The Lieutenant held up a hand. His face gave no expression as she turned and sat with her back barely pressing into his left leg. "Permission granted, Valor." He nodded, knowing damn well she couldn't see. "Silva was more than happy to let my sappy ass go. I'm sure you could tell by the way he

talked about me." Valor paused and inhaled the crisp cool air of the evening before continuing. "This weapon isn't a gift. It's more like a threat."

Her helmet had turned and was facing him now. Valor wore the standard Orbital Drop Shock Trooper armor, but he had added several other pieces that she could have sworn looked a bit like Covenant material. She doubted it though; it was against the regulations of \*\*Cole Protocol\*\* and no one was that much of an idiot. \_The only exception to that rule was Emile\_, her mind disagreed. "Why would the Major do that?" The Helljumper huffed angrily, looking anywhere but at her face. "Hell if I know! All I know is that I've been in some deep shit throughout my \_career\_," she made a mental note of how his teeth ground together at the word. "That's probably why people are more than happy to ship me off. I think Silva hates me more than he hates you and the MC." He chuckled softly and slid down the boulder to sit beside her, holding out his hand. "Regardless, I think we can be friendsâ€|right?" She nodded and gripped his hand with such sheer force that it had him on the razor blade of pain. She released it, propping her forearms onto her knees. He laughed and patted the top of her helmet.

"Signora dei lupi affamatiâ€|" He muttered under his breath and tugged a bit at the dog tags that were roped around his M6D pistol. Hazel eyes read the inscription: '\_ODST Gunnery Sergeant Valor, Nikolai. Service Tag Number 927-485-137. Call sign, Archangel.\_' \_I wonderâ€|are you watching me up there, baby twin? Hehâ€|I would assume so. We're polar opposites; you are the good, I the evil. You are the light, I the darknessâ€|You bear the mark of the Archangel; God's warriors. I bear the face of the Demon; the Devil's slave. I killed for the wrong reasons, you killedâ€|well, I don't believe one can ever truly find a \_right \_reason to murder. But you didn't do it to watch blood spill; you did it to protect Mother Earth and humanity at all costs. \_Damn it!\_ You gave your life for a demon! You disgraced your own God, Nikolai! You should have left me to die! I should be in Hell, burning on a damnedâ€|\_"

"What does that mean, Valor?" A glance over his shoulder brought him face to face with a visor mixed with the colors of bravery, strength, fear, bloodshed, bondâ€|

"What does what mean, ma'am?"

"Signora dei lupi affamati; what does that mean?"

Blood seeped into the fuzzy dimples of his cheeks, coloring them carmine. "Ah, it's in the Italian language. It translates to \_lady of the hungry wolves\_." He paused and waited for a scolding or possibly the worst ass kicking of his life time. For a while, he didn't feel any pain, didn't hear any movement from the presence beside him. Suddenly, his pistol was firmly, but gently pulled from his grasp. The Lieutenant pressed her slender index finger to the piece of metal that read his brother's name. "Is that my name?"

He smiled and, with much effort, stretched his arm over her shoulder (consciously dodging the shoulder piece) and touched the minute piece of gleaming steel branded with the Helljumper insignia. "My \_maiden lupo\_? I think it suits you. But there is one problem."

Her head rose a bit and shifted in his direction. "What is it?"



He laughed louder than he thought possible at her little quirk. "It's unfair that you get to have a fancy title. I want one too."

"I seeâ€¦I think that your title should be \_Å're az  
Ã;rtatlan\_."

"Guardian of the innocent," he whispered; the words felt gentle and vulnerable as they slipped past his scarred lips. "Is Hungarian your native language?"

"Noâ€¦a friend of mine taught me bits and pieces."

He nodded and finally let go of the tag; let go of the past. "Your friend was stationed on Reach." It sounded more like a factâ€¦"like a statistic and Valor couldn't deny that it wasn't. Just as his brother was a statistic. In this war, who the hell wasn't?"

"Yeah," she agreed, subconsciously touching a grenade pouch. She seemed to think better of it and pulled her hand away. "He stayed behind."

There was a bullet of guilt pressed into his chest, as if all of this was his fault. "Wellâ€¦I'm sure he gave the Covenant his damned best. Maybe Reach is a bit torn right now. But I know that one day, we can take it back. We won't let those bastards steal Earth from our clutches. Not like all the other settlements. Not again. We're kicking their asses' right here and right now."

She chuckled and shifted her weight. "A bit sentimental, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess. But who the hell isn't these days?" He cleared the lump that started to form in his throat. Nikolai would have said the same thing. Silently, the man stood and made his way around the large mass of woman. He knelt directly in front of her, balancing on the balls of his feet. "We stick together. We're all fighting. We're all suffering. I say we should at least have someone to suffer and fight with." Holding out his fist, he grinned, feeling his lips strain and crack, the blood starting to slowly drip onto his chin.

The Spartan nodded and pressed her fist into his. She patted his head like he was a dog and stood up. "Why do you keep doing that?" Valor had the need to pout, but he was damned if he was going to do \_that\_ in front of a lady.

The question made her stop and stare at the sky with such intensity; he thought the whole damn thing would come crumbling down on the top of them. "I knew someone who was a bit like you. He joked about being human. One day, he actually said '\_I'm not human; nothing about me is remotely close. I'm a dog of the military; nothing more, nothing less.\_' That upset my friend. Actually, it upset everyone, but no one bothered to respond to it. I did though. I leaned over and patted his head, like a dog." He could distinctly hear the grin in voice as she spoke. "He turned around and gave me a death glare, but I shrugged it off like it was the most casual thing to ever do."

She started to head back to her quarters, somewhere secluded in Alpha Base. "I'm going to go turn in for the night. As a suggestion, you should do the same."

It sounded like an order coming from her and he was more than happy to comply. "Aye, aye, ma'am." Valor turned, snatched his helmet from the ground, and turned to head back inside the base himself when he caught the eye of McKay. She held his gaze from a distance that would have gotten her killed if she were an enemy; he put a thousand dollars' worth of his money on this thought as his eyes narrowed. He refused to have any eye contact with anyone who was associated with Silva. Inhaling a gulp of air and puffing up like a majestic falcon, he sealed his helmet and marched back inside.

\* \* \*

><p>The Lieutenant paused at the Master Chief's quarters and peered inside out of plain curiosity. His helmet was removed and she stepped in, knowing that he heard her coming down the hall; it was easy for a Spartan to detect another Spartan. A bright, bleach-white smile was her greeting as the helmet was set down onto a table.<p>

"I hope you're going to get some sleep after this," he leaned against the wall, avoiding putting his entire weight on the material as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Sleep? I would butâ€¦I need to report to Major Silva on the Recon mission to retrieve the Captain." When he rolled his eyes, she grunted her disapproval at the gesture and mirrored his stance. "What is it you disagree with?"

"Regardless of the whereabouts of Captain Keyes, although important, you can report to the Major in the morning." The voice that spoke to her was firm and just slightly demanding.

She nodded and ceased any further argument that dared to bubble past her lips. Her hands clenched and unclenched as she struggled; the Spartan even bit her tongue to prevent from saying anything else as she swayed from left to right. The fierce fire that had once been in John's eyes softened as he put a hand on her shoulder. The Lieutenant looked up, the visor glistening in the light. He smiled and patted to the top of her head.

"We'll find the Captain and bring him backâ€¦alive." At the last word his arm slithered around each of her shoulders to which she hummed in amusement.

"Understood, sir. Permission to voice a suggestion?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "What's the suggestion, Lieutenant?"

"I believe that you should pay your respects to sleep as well so that when we do find the Captain, I won't have to take the grunt of the work."

"Tch. Does this 'work' involve bantering with certain A.I.s and leaving us open to be preyed upon by enemy aircraft?"

Heavily sighing, she nodded and let her head slump in defeat. "I deserved that. But if you're going to chew me off for it, you should at least be fair and do the same to her."

"No," he drawled the word out as he subconsciously tapped her visor,

staring blankly off into a corner of the room. "Pestering you has its perks."

"See? Always putting the grunt of the work on me; unbelievable!"

He laughed and barely gave her a squeeze before moving back to where his helmet sat. "Did you receive your own quarters?"

"No, I assumed since the Major didn't say anything at all to me, that I'm bunking with you."

John turned back to her as he pried the left shoulder piece from his under-suit, motioning back to the one bed in the room. He didn't need to voice his question. "It's fine; I can take the floor. I'm not taking off my armor anyway. You sleep comfortably." Opening his mouth to argue, she held up a hand and pulled her kukri from holster plastered to her chest. "I'll feel better this way."

Shrugging he set down the other drab colored shoulder piece, before moving onto his elbows and forearms. "Until official 'lights out', how about you take a nap for now?"

"Yes sir, Master Chief, sir," she murmured quietly and he figured that was the closest to tired she would allow herself to sound in front of others. For a moment he wanted to tell her his real name but he honestly didn't know the woman that well. She scooted to the entrance of the door and dropped her head onto her knees with an obnoxious clunk!

"John."

Looking up, the Lieutenant watched as he pried piece after piece of armor. "Signora."

"Signora? You mean lady?"

"Yes. You sound surprised."

"Well I've heard of how dogs are given the name Lady, but not people."

"It's not my first name, but it's the first one that's stuck."

"Is Valor responsible for this?"

She smirked behind her mask; never once lifting her head as he moved his attention to his knee guards. "How observant you are John."

He squinted for a moment. "That sounded weird coming from you."

"That felt weird saying it."

They met each other's gaze for a moment before chuckling and each returning to their postures of peace and calm. "You know, it would be a night like this that I would always stare up at the sky and wonder if there was someone up there who was curious about me down here."

"â€| "

"It's the anniversary."

"The anniversary of what?"

"â€|Of the day my planet was glassed."

"I'mâ€" "

"Don't apologize for something you had no control over whatsoever. It just confuses me."

He gave a forlorn smile and set the last piece of armor onto the table before settling onto the cot. Staring at the ceiling, John wondered what stirred in her head, what made her concerned about the Captain so deeplyâ€|

"Neutral night, John."

The quivering in his lips involuntarily started as he tried to hold back the joke he so desperately wanted to tell her. "Neutral... night, Signora?"

"Yeah, because I'm not sure whether if it'll be a good or bad one. I can't predict the future."

"I seeâ€| "

"Creative, huh?"

"Something like thatâ€|Neutral night, Lady."

"Neutral night, old man."

He could make out a small, high pitched noise in the darkness and realized that the Lieutenant was giggling at her own attempt at a joke. Sighing and turning his back to the wall, the Chief drifted off to Mendez's words: "\*\*\*Sleep can be as deadly a weapon as a pistol or a grenade.\*\*"

\* \* \*

><p>"What do you mean 'classified'?" Major Antonio Silva growled between clenched teeth and the Chief's eyes widened as he saw the Lieutenant standing in front of the desk, her back to him.<p>

"Information regarding my credentials is classified. I'm not permitted to tell anyone who I am or what my name is, sir."

The Major's jaw clenched as his formed into a tight fist on the makeshift desk. "And who exactly authorized this?"

"That is also classified, sir."

Silva sighed and tried to regain his seemingly calm composure. "Figures; I should've suspected that they would black out a \_freak's\_ file. Unlike you, I had plenty of access to the Master Chief's profile." He let his eyes settle onto the only other male in the room

before they snapped back to the glossed visor. "Regardless, I want to make something clear; you report to me and me only. You do not report to Keyes, you do not report to Cortana, you do not report to yourself. Since there is a lack of captains on deck, Lieutenant McKay will take the position as my executive officer. Is that understood?"

"Sir, yes sir!" The Spartans replied in unison, giving a crisp yet respectful salute. They hadn't even known the Major for a full day and here he was igniting a fuse he couldn't stop. John had a sneaking suspicion that that was his full intent.

"Good. Let me also make another point in saying that it will be the ODSs and not you super freaks," he spat the word like a curse. "Who will win this war. Understand that the Spartan program is over. It will be humans who will take back the colonies, not futile bowling balls rolling around in fancy armor. Am I understood?"

There was a long moment of silence before they replied: "Sir. No sir."

Silva nodded, as if he understood their disapproval and leaned into his chair. He decided to turn his attention to the Lieutenant as he gave the signal for the Spartans to sit. His eyes traced the outline of her helmet before the familiar angular shapes of a standard Helljumper shoulder pad grabbed his short attention span. "Lieutenant. What the hell is on your shoulder?"

Her eyebrows lifted as she looked down at her left shoulder. "An ODS armor shoulder variant, sir."

"Why the hell is it there?" He ground out.

"When I was initially given my armor, I was allowed to make customizations to it. This included choosing which armor pieces I wanted to wear, sir," she explained, still remaining patient even though the man didn't deserve it.

"I see. Can you state as to why you chose Helljumper gear?" His eyes turned into a silent, ice cold fury and the Chief's jaw tightened just slightly.

"When I first learned of the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, I was a bit in awe. Men and women who jumped feet first into hell, risking their lives the moment they leave the pocket of a ship. I wanted to do the same, so as the day came to form my armor, I chose this piece." She flicked the shoulder and smiled as it responded with a satisfying ting.

Silva internally smirked as he let the next question flow from him: "And have you actually landed in a pod before, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

He nodded and kept his satisfaction hidden until it cut short as she spoke again. "I have not used a pod to land onto a planet before. However, I have landed on a planet using nothing but a survival kit."

Again, the frozen fury returned in his brutal and unforgiving eyes,

but melted as he turned his attention to a seemingly fascinating spot in the room. "I would applaud, but you really aren't worth the effort. Now, regarding your plan to retrieve Captain Keyes?"

\* \* \*

><p>Valor shook his head back and forth, back and forth. The Lieutenant shrugged, her body language speaking for her. <em>What?</em> Chuckling he secured a connection between the two of them and the words that danced from his mouth were a bit slurred. "I just don't see how you could pull off what you did with Silva. The guy is an asshole. You though; you're the very essence of what he can't tolerate and never will tolerate." He sighed and checked over his DMR for the thirteenth time that night. "I just don't see how you do it."

"There's nothing much to actually do when you have an over classified file, an upper hand in both strength and ability, and a higher IQ of intelligence. Everything comes naturally, Valor. It's a gift."

"Mm," he agreed and felt the itch in the back of his throat for nicotine. He turned to Sergeant Johnson on his left and prodded him in the side with his elbow. When he was met with a mahogany hued glare, he held up two fingers at where his mouth would be and tilted his head.

Johnson huffed as heavily as humanly possible and pulled one pack of 'cancer sticks' from his pouch. "You owe me one favor, boy." Valor grinned and nodded, taking the pack and holding them in front his visor like God sent it himself.

"You can only smoke those after the mission."

Groaning loudly, the pack was put away. Party pooper, the Helljumper pouted in his head.

"Approaching drop point one." Foe Hammer announced over the Pelican's internal COM. The LT, Valor, and another Drop Shock Trooper by the name of Pistol Hartmann moved to the opening hangar door. Weapons locked and loaded, the men were the first to step off and let their boost hit the grass. The Lieutenant turned back and looked at the remaining five men: there three Marines she had failed to learn the names of, Sergeant Johnson and his sniper rifle, and lastly, the Master Chief and Cortana. She wanted to give words of encouragement to the soldiers that were before her, but couldn't exactly put what she thought about them into words. So instead she nodded, arms crossed over her chest. Silva had assigned her to lead the mission, despite his disapproval of the female and the Spartans in general.

"I want radio silence from all of you until we hit the ship. Cortana, you're the exception; I want any updates on the Captain and enemy patrol units that may serve as a problem. Stay together, be alert and don't let your guard down for an instant. Follow the Master Chief; he'll know what to do. Am I understood?"

"Ma'am, yes ma'am!" They all replied, except for Hartmann. She turned and looked down at him, her gaze making him freeze and falter at his own defiance for a moment. "Am I understood?" She repeated the same phrase, but added a growl.

"Yes, ma'am!" He saluted and caught the sight of Valor shaking his head and laughing in his peripheral vision.

"Good. You all know the plan," she turned back to the larger group and nodded, giving them a salute to which they graciously returned. She jumped out of the Pelican and watched it soar off to its second destination, before turning to her own team. "Up those rocks, troopers."

"Understood."

"Acknowledged, Lupo."

It took effort and a fair amount of their time, but each member of the Delta squad made it to the tops of the rock formations. The wind started to stir in the night and Valor looked around. The Lieutenant her head back towards him and he grunted over their private COM. "This wind is kicking up some dirt. It'll be hard to see, but it'll help keep us hidden from anything overhead as long as the pazzo bastards don't decide to use thermal radars. This wind will give us crutch for stealth, but not Beta team."

She nodded and shouldered her sniper rifle moving along the plateau. "This is Beta team. We have arrived at drop point two and have tracked movement in the area ahead of us. Do you copy Delta?" Cortana reported with such ease, Valor pictured the somewhat nude A.I. lounging in a chair and sipping from a beer bottle.

"I copy, Beta." The Lieutenant crouched and crawled onto her stomach, sniper in hand as she zoomed to the fifth magnitude and counted more than ten enemies in the area. Valor and Hartmann mimicked her movements; Valor had the crosshairs of his DMR trained onto a Grunt nestled into the seat of a turret and Hartmann tracked the radar for more hostiles in the next patch of land beyond the current one. "Enemies in sight; I have visual. Are you in position?"

"Affirmative," responded the Chief as he gently stroked the trigger, his crosshairs skimming over the curve of the Elite's traditional battle head piece as it trudged across the field lazily. He held up two fingers and pointed them forward. Johnson nodded and took position behind a rock. As quickly as he could, the Sergeant set up his own rifle and set an eye on his scope. Giving the field a once over, he never tore away from his rifle as he held up a fist. \_Ready.\_ Cortana set a green marker for where Delta team had taken position and displayed it on the Chief's HUD. When he saw the markers flicker, he did the same with his own.

Hartmann aimed at his target; a Jackal with round amethyst eyes. His thin lips tilted downwards into a grimace. The Lieutenant held her breath as her own crosshairs locked onto the head of the tall creature with armor the color of rust. Adjusting her magnification to the tenth, she gave each man of Delta team a curt nod before counting down over the radio.

"On my mark; threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|mark." A total of eight shots echoed throughout the canyon. Valor grinned as the Grunt slumped and fell out of the turret, blood and flesh oozing from its face. The Jackal screamed in agony as it fell to the ground, half of its face hanging

hopelessly. Five sleeping Grunts fell back, each soaking in a pool of tangelo and cerulean, the liquid illuminating in the dark. Two bullets went through each eye of the Elite and the Spartans smirked as the top of its head shattered completely. The rest of the aliens scattered; Elites snarled to keep the smaller species in control.

Valor looked hopefully to the Lieutenant, speaking with the giddiness of a child on Christmas morning. "Rag 'em and tag 'em, ma'am?"

She nodded once and he sneered with glee behind his mask. "Rag 'em and tag 'em," she repeated and pulled her trigger. The bullet shot straight through the Jackal; its body flew backwards and slammed into the face of an unsuspecting Elite. Valor silently raised a fist, acknowledging her kill.

Hartmann exhaled slowly and slid forward until he could receive a better shot at the Elite that stumbled backwards. The balls of his feet ground into the dirt as he pulled the trigger and hit its neck. He sat up instantly and grinned at his gruesome work until he realized he slipped off the high plateau they were perched upon. He struggled to keep his balance as he slid forward, letting out a gasp of terror; he hated heights.

She raised her head in time to see Hartmann continuously sliding forward. The LT gripped his ankle and stood, rifle nestled into the nook of her left arm and Helljumper hanging upside down, his ankle in her vice grip. Sighing, she killed another Jackal and spoke over the radio: "Marines, move in and take down remaining forces; however you choose to do that is completely up to you," she paused as she watched a familiar figure reach for his grenade pouch. "All grenades are to remain pinned, Mendoza." Glancing down at Hartmann, her tilted to the side as he dangled in front of her, battle rifle pulled to his chest like it was a life line.

"Uh... permission to ask of a request ma'am?" Hartmann whispered as he felt the blood drain from his feet and surge to his head.

"Granted," she drawled and adjusted her grip on her own rifle.

"Can you please put me down, ma'am?" The edges of the night began to swirl around him and his tongue felt numb. She only nodded once as she used his ankle to propel the soldier upwards into the air. A hand gripped his calf this time.

"Valor, hold this for me?" Not bothering to turn, the Spartan flung her rifle at Valor who caught it with both hands and whistled low, stroking the beauty in his gloved hands.

The Lieutenant slid her hand under Hartmann's arm and pulled him upwards. He shivered as he felt his blood course back down into his body. As he was set back onto his feet, he glanced at the ground in shame. Opening his mouth to speak, he shut up as soon as his eyes took in the sight of the Spartan continuing her work of eliminating every damn Covenant that came into her crosshairs. He knelt onto one knee and did the same, remaining silent.

The next field was a bit more open and had various lights scattered around. The Master Chief kept an eye on the three triangles that moved above him. He held up a fist and each Marine stopped, waiting



for his signal to continue on. Every man tensed, waiting to let hell loose with their weapons of choice. The Lieutenant motioned for Hartmann to scan the area and he complied without complaint. He counted three Elites, a batch of ten grunts and six Jackals. He reported the list to the Lieutenant, who then in turn recited the list to the ground team.

"Understood, Lieutenant," Cortana replied.

"Ground team at the ready?" Three twelve questioned and five markers on her HUD flickered. "Give the word Sierra."

The Chief uncurled his fist and bent his four fingers ahead. The Marines trudged through, having previously shouldered their BR55 rifles and armed their MA5Bs. The Chief sniped the Grunt that had jumped into the turret two meters above him and slung it over his shoulder, pulling out his own assault rifle. He shot automatic fire from his hip, mowing down an Elite in his way. He stepped over the slumped body, scanning the area around him as the Marines moved ahead. In his peripheral vision, he saw three brutally beaten bodies soaking in a lake of warm crimson red. Checking over the bodies for dog tags and extra ammo, he stood, packing away his discoveries and a health kit.

Combat senses kicking in, he heard movement in the grass before his radar painted an enemy off to his right. He turned, assault rifle at the ready, but instead meeting face to face with another alien, he was met with ultramarine bodily fluids. What was left of the Elite plummeted into the grass at his feet. His lips pressed together as he eyed the work of the Lieutenant and looked up. He could make out her silhouette in the dust the wind kicked up and smirked, moving ahead.

The marines did good work of eliminating the Grunts. Each was swimming in their own bodily fluids. He paused as he saw the faint dot of an enemy on his radar. He shifted and saw a Grunt covered in bullet holes let out a strangled bark as it struggled to lift itself. **\*\*Crack!\*\*** Eyes of a sixty year old man blinked slowly as they watched the light in the eyes of a hideous creature fade into nothing but black. "Moving into the next area. Delta, do you copy?"

"Delta copies. Good work ground team. Advance ahead."

John watched his footing after advising the Marines to do the same as he moved along the thin slope. He heard Johnson curse more than once and smiled a bit, knowing that the Sergeant was notorious for having large feet. The Spartan II wasn't an exception though. As they exited off of the slope with everyone alive, Cortana gave warning to other enemies in the area.

"Delta Air to Beta Ground, we do not have a visual of you. Repeat: we do not have visual of you. Acknowledge?" The LT silently cursed herself as her team continued walking towards the Truth and Reconciliation.

"Acknowledged Delta. Do you have visual of the enemy Battle Cruiser?" Cortana pressed.

"We have visual."

"Orders?"

"Our scout says there is only one other way for you to near the gravity lift below the ship. You'll have to engage the enemy. We'll meet you at the gravitational lift. Delta team out."

The Chief scanned the surroundings the ground team had stumbled upon and made a decision. He would take the left path ahead and have the marines advance up the middle. Cortana gave the orders and the Marines nodded silently. The large mass of man began moving again, past the middle path, and skidded to a stop behind a six foot tall rock. He smiled and crouched, waiting for the red targets on his radar to approach closer. Patience was a virtue of his; he could all day for the bastards to come strolling along in front of him—but the Captain was a high priority.

The Jackal paused, its head cocking from left to right, lidless amaranth colored eyes rotating a full one hundred eighty degrees. Its pulsing, radiant amber shield lowered to the ground. It tensed as it heard the soft crunch of boots heading towards it. Before the ugly specimen could utter a \_squawk!, \_the butt of a rifle crushed its skull, bone caving into flesh. Amaranth eyes rolled forward to capture its last glimpse—the capture the face of its murderer. A haze of smooth, gleaming golden rod visor was all it could see before the cold, empty void of ebony seared the edges of its vision.

The battle that followed cost them one soldier and no one made it moved on without at least a splotch of blood on his armor.

\* \* \*

><p>The Lieutenant watched as the Master Chief stormed through the area, guns blazing through any Covenant bitch that even <em>glanced<em> at him. She held in her laughter at the sight; it was like a Warthog running over civilian vehicles. She tilted her head back at the two Helljumpers who watched the onslaught in awe.  
"Ready?"

Valor's head was the first to snap up. "Uh, listen Lupo—I was okay with climbing up this thing but—I'm climbing down? I don't know if my life insurance covers that." He looked towards Hartmann for help, who nodded.

"I have to go with ugly on this one," the marksman agreed, much to Valor's displeasure.

"\_Whoa!\_ Are you calling \_me\_ ugly, \_due facce bastardo?\_"

"I'm not calling you for dinner, \_hard ass\_."

"First my face, now my ass! I'm starting to think you got a thing for me, amico," Valor chuckled well naturedly.

"Oh, please! I'd rather take my chances with a split jaw bastard than take a god damned \_glimpse\_ at \_you\_."

"Tch. You know you want this body. But you know what? You can't have it! Off limits, \_stronzo!\_" He drawled out the Italian word, placing his hands on his hips to emphasize his point.

"You little motherâ€" Hartmann gasped as he was gripped around the waist pulled into the air. Valor blinked; he hadn't caught what happened, but Hartmann wasn't in the spot he was beforeâ€"

He growled out of instinct as he was picked up as well. When he glanced up and saw the Lieutenant, his hazel eyes widened to the point where they would be labeled as 'puppy eyes'. He pouted, wiggling just the slightest as she stepped towards the edge. "You're both idiots," she muttered under her breath, before sliding the side of the rock wall and jumping off, using an Elite to stick her landing. She carelessly dropped the troopers in her hands and nodded towards the Master Chief, who approached her.

"That was the last one," he confirmed and she turned, smirking in triumph at her bloody work. "Cortana, radio Foe Hammer and tell her to send in the next batch of ODSs."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," the synthetic voice acknowledged.

"Marines! I want you on that lift in five!" The Lieutenant yelled across to the men at the other side of the pit. They raised their fists and shouted a cheery \_hoo-rah!\_

Just as she had turned to give orders to other marines who made up Delta Air team, a high shrill was heard over the radio followed by the unmistakable ringing blast of a Hunter's cannon. She watched through half lidded eyes as Valor scampered around the pit, two large masses not far behind, and slapped a hand against her visor in irritation. The Chief raised a hand as if to say something, then thought better of it as the Lieutenant marched forward, picking up a plasma rifle and slipping her fingers through the familiar mechanics.

"Valor, you better hope those Hunters get to you before \_I\_ do, because I won't be as gentle," she growled and charged the plasma rifle in her hand, before letting the bolt of energy loose, hitting its target; the head of the worm-like abomination. It turned and roared its defiance, the sickly green cannon charging again.

"Come and get it asshole," she muttered through her tight lipped grin and front flipped into the pit, dodging the rod with such ease, Hartmann was sure that the Goddesses he prayed to were writhing in utter jealousy from the graceful move.

Valor whined as he continued running. "I might just take the Hunters up on their offer for dinner then," he groaned.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Note:<strong> NEXT TIME ON HYPER LETHAL VECTORS-WILL VALOR EVER STOP THE CONSTANT ERECTION THAT FORMS WHEN HE LOOKS IN THE MIRROR? WILL HARTMANN GROW A PAIR OF BALLS AND TRY TO OUT MAN THE LIEUTENANT? WILL THE LIEUTENANT TURN INTO A MAN? WILL THE MASTER CHIEF EVER GROW A FACE? WILL CORTANA STOP RAPING ENEMY SHIPS (\_No, she has an endless sexual hunger\_)? WHO KNOWS?

FIND OUT NEXT TIME ON HYPER LETHAL VECTORS. \*CUE BAD QUALITY MUSIC HERE\*

-LadyDynamite312 3333

## 6. Shut Up and Get Behind Me Sir

\_In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.\_ "Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower

**\*\*A/N:\*\*** I dedicate this chapter, the rest of this story, and all the other stories I may or may not write to DragoLord19D. He helped me by creating a character that I seriously love. Thank you, SO, SO much. He is the greatest beta a girl could ask for.

Now, I know I disappeared off the chart and shit, but I'll explain at the end of the chapter. I made it extra-long as an apology. Erê|I'm really sorry guys. ANYWAY, READ, READ, READ.

\* \* \*

><p>Bullets bounced off of the overwhelmingly large beast as the Lieutenant ran forward. She didn't bother to shoot; there was too much armor and the Marines were just wasting all of their damn ammo. Valor hadn't stopped running, in fact, it seemed like he was running faster since the Lieutenant jumped into the pit of dirt. One of the abominations charged its cannon, sallow chartreuse substance surging and pulsing before exploding into a sudden outburst. The Lieutenant cursed harshly under her breath as she barely dodged the rod, sprinting towards her target. Her eyes narrowed as she passed Valor. Keeping her attention on the first Hunter, she completely ignored the second, giving the duo an advantage over her. The eleven foot tall alien roared as she slid beneath it and managed to make it past its giant hooves. Slamming its indestructible shield into the ground, the Lieutenant reappeared behind the beast and grunted as she jumped and gripped to one of its spikes. She heard another charge and release of the cannon followed by agonizing screams of pain. Gritting her teeth in determination, she remembered something Jorge had showed her.<p>

...

\_The taller Spartan smiled genuinely, shifting his grip on the Spartan laser in his hands. His gaze followed the Lieutenant as she struggled to take down the beast; her method was to shoot and move, shoot and move. But Jorge knew better. He had the most experience in battle on Noble Team, even if the younger adults failed to realize such a fact.\_

\_"Six," he rumbled in his thick Hungarian accent over the com. "Jump onto the bastard's back while I distract it."\_

\_The Spartan III poked her head over the poor pile of annihilated rock she used as cover. Jorge gave a hart warming chuckle as he watched her head tilt in questioning. She looked like a rabbit coming out of its home from his distance. "You don't trust me?"\_

\_She stuttered over the com trying to find the right words and his broad, furry smile widened. "That's what I thought. Now stop your damn worrying and jump on his back." There was a moment of hesitation and he sighed softly, shifting his grip on the laser again. "I promise."\_

That\_ managed to get her out of the cover and he let loose a chain of manly giggles. Focusing his attention on the mammoths, he set and charged the Spartan laser, ready to unleash the red fury of hell at any moment. The Lieutenant ran across the field, as Jorge pulled the pin to one of his grenades and threw it with all of his strength at the Hunter that turned towards his comrade. It exploded and from the smoke he could see it shake and stretch to its full height in anger. Pulling his M6D, he fired off a few rounds and moved behind a rock to grab both the monsters attention. He was successful; they both turned, roaring in protest at his attempt to try and defeat them. He eyed the one on his right. \_Okay Six, it's up to you to do the rest now.\_ Six jumped on top of the Hunter, using its obnoxiously large spikes to stay on. She searched for Jorge as it tried desperately to shake her off. Out of the corner of her eye a thin, crimson line was pointing in her direction. She followed it and realized that it was aiming at the orange gaps. \_Shit.

\_"Might want to jump off now, Six."\_

\_"\_Now\_ you tell me," she muttered under her breath and received a chuckle as her response. She climbed to the crest that shaped its head. Using the balls of her feet, she pushed off and into the air, smiling a bit at the free feeling. She twirled forward and tucked her body in as the familiar spray of red energy marked cracks into the golden embers of Reach's sunlight. It was a beautiful sight and as she landed successfully on her feet, she smiled in the direction of the horizon. Maybe someday, when things weren't as bad as they were, she would come back and visit Jorgeâ€|and paint her picture.\_

-. . . -.

Growling, her fingers finally managed to pull back on the spikes, pulling the beast back as well. \_There we go. Progress. If you cooperated in the first place, I wouldn't have to tug on you, now would I?\_ Her teeth gritted together in the most painful way as the Hunter struggled to shake her from its back. If only she could grab the attention of the secondâ€| "Valor, I need you to run behind this Hunter."

\_"What?! Have you lost your damn mind?!" He screamed, advancing on her position regardless.

"Depends; am I dead yet?"

He sighed heavily and glanced up at the sky. \_Why me? Why not Hartmann? He's much better suited for Spartan babysittingâ€|You know what, I take that back. I was a much better option. He needs to grow a pair.\_ "You're still crazy," he growled quietly.

"Luckily for us both, I like crazy."

"Tch." He skidded to a halt behind the metal arm that stretched upwards in the direction of the ship, slinging his DMR over his back and drawing his pistol. Sighing as he sent a silent prayer to any god that listened, he ran out into the open, letting loose one bullet on the Hunter that was focused on the marines. Valor knew exactly what the Lieutenant was planning and he had a suspicion that's why she told him to get his ass out there. The Hunter ignored the frightened

humans, turning towards Valor in an instant. Cursing, he ran behind the second beast the Lieutenant clung to. The nebulous, frigid air of the night changed as the cannon charged. Standing behind the same Hunter that roared and struggled, he waited for a few heartbeats, then nodded to himself.

"I've got his attention, Lupo. You might want to jump off now," he told her in a fretful tone.

"Get to cover. \_Now.\_"

"Yes ma'am!" He reloaded his M6D, fired another shot at the approaching creature and its radiating weapon, then ran back to his cover behind the obnoxiously large arm keeping the gravity lift working. The whirring of the fuel rod missile was all he could hear before it made impact with its partner. Even though he was straining his ears to hear what had happened, he couldn't exactly make out if he heard two masses hit the ground or one. He heard cheering over the com and decided to peak his head out. As soon as his eyes set on the scene, he imbedded the memory into his mind; it was something he would dear to him for the rest of his life. The female Spartan stood, the onyx, opaque color of her armor merging with the empty void of the night. She stood atop the Covenant warrior, the blended visor gleaming in what little moon light there was. Her head was tilted in his direction and his chest tightened as the incandescent, tangerine blood of the Hunter dripped down her right arm and he thought it suited her perfectly well. She was breath taking. She never had to show her face, never had to be promiscuous or flirtatious, never had to flaunt or show off; she was herself. She was an unmovable center in his little system of planets and even as his feet stumbled forward towards her, even as the world continued to move around them in an insignificant blur, he knew. He knew that she was \_Bellona\_, she was \_Athena\_. She was a tenacious, fearless protector and warrior.

She was beautiful.

"This is Echo 419, we are approaching the grav-lift," Foe Hammer spoke over the com and the Lieutenant turned her head to watch as the Pelican approached.

"Roger that, 419. You're clear to land."

"Aye, aye, ma'am."

Valor blinked slowly, trying to rein in his thoughts, to which he failed. He growled angrily as he looked down at his weapon, furiously trying to make sense of what just happened. She asked for his help to draw the attention of the other hunter. He was reluctant at first; he feared that that the end result would be two more dead soldiers in this war, but she prevailed. Then there was an explosion and "Oh for the love of God", he groaned in his head. "I'm too god damned old for this love bullshit and I know it. Yet no damn it! Mission first, drooling later!" Grimacing deeply behind his helmet, he placed one boot on the steps leading to the actual lift, waiting for further orders. The increasing pressure of a hand on his shoulder made him turn, bringing him face to face with none other than Sergeant Johnson. The older man smiled, his mustache shuffling like a black pelt on his face. There was a look of understanding in his mahogany hued eyes. A look that clearly said 'I know exactly what you're going through.'

The Helljumper wasn't exactly sure what to think of this. He knew Johnson from Reach. They had crossed paths every now and then and there was an exchange of insults, ammo, and nicotine, but this was different. He respected the Sergeant and knew he was wise in battle. But never wise in this. So, failing to fully understand both his own emotions and Johnson's past, Valor settled with giving a light shrug. \_What are you gonna do?\_ He thought hastily. As other ODSs arrived from the Pelican, he straightened his posture, puffing up like the majestic falcon he wished he was and readied himself for the next firefight that would continue inside the ship. Johnson huffed in empty amusement as he turned back to Mendoza, the only other marine left from Beta ground team and gave him a good nudge in the shoulder. The Hispanic man gave a crooked smile and started to go off about how this mission reminded him about some bug and Johnson just watched him, eyes lazily keeping contact with the marine as he stood and chattered about.

The Chief jumped out of the turret seat. He was pretty impressed with himself, the Lieutenant even more so. She'd managed to take down one Hunter by using the other to her advantage. He never would have thought of that kind of tactic. It was risky, extremely risky, but she prevailed and survived. There was also the fact that she had a new story to tell next time her new Shock Trooper companion talked to her. He stood by said Spartan as she angrily flicked blood and flesh off of her person. He smirked and leaned towards her, tapping the holster of the infamous Kukri. She huffed and placed her left hand on her hip. "As if that's going to work?" She questioned, to which he shrugged.

"Just giving suggestions here. It doesn't mean you have to use it."

Huffing, she settled for leaving her armor faintly streaked with orange blood. \_Just what I need. An ugly mess to go with my god damned armor.\_ A chill crept up her spine, one that felt vaguely familiar but was still strange as she straightened her posture and peered around the Covenant encampment. Nothing seemed to be out of place and she scolded herself for jumping the horse like that. Turning back to the Master Chief, she saw a blurred image of maroon flicker over her visor. She paused, bit back her hesitation and walked over to the lift. "Let's go marines!" The ODSs that stood with the Spartans were now much more open minded, and didn't bitch at what they were. In fact, they seemed just as enthusiastic as Valor always did. With everyone on the lift, the Lieutenant and the Master Chief moved to stand in the middle, back to back. Their weapons hung lazily at their sides as they watched each soldier pulled into the sky. Eventually it was just the two of them left, and their heads tilted back as they stared upwards, feeling as though someone had gently gripped their bodies and tugged them inside the ship.

It was quiet for a while. The anxiousness of the ODSs was so thick in the air that it could have been easily cut with a knife. They all took in their surroundings; there were four doors (two on to the left and two to the right), a pair of hangar doors (most likely used for heavy cargo/vehicles) was at both ends of the room, and crates were placed at random. The soldiers steadily made their way around the room, taking time to observe it. Finally, one was brave enough to break the silence. "So, how do we make our way to the popsicle stand from here?"

"\_If by popsicle stand\_" came Cortana's dry tone. "\_You mean, the holding cell facility or brig, then we'll need to access these doors. Give me a moment to override.\_"

"You could've said something sooner," muttered the same marine.

"\_I heard that.\_"

Meanwhile, in the twists, turns, and explosions known as the Lieutenant's conscience, she pondered about the red imagery she had seen before. It was difficult to describe; it had shape, but nothing that she could distinctly place and there was purpose to it. As if the imagery hadn't appeared just to spite her. \_So, if Valor hasn't stolen what's left of my sanity, then just what the hell am I seeing flash in front of my damn eyes?!\_ Grumbling to herself, she set the thoughts aside. The mission had to be completed. She and as for the other men (and A.I.) that stood before her, weren't going to storm onto enemy territory with guns blazing, just to watch the Captain die. It would be a waste of time, energy, and planning. And if the Captain died, that meant that Major Silva would be left to take his place along with Lieutenant McKay. She suppressed a shiver that threatened to shake her demeanor and watched as one door opened. "We're in; good work Cortana."

**\*\*Yes, I would agree. Good work indeedâ€¦| for a bitch.\*\***

Something growled in the back of her head, and she turned trying to see if any of the Troopers had heard the same thing. Helmets were either turned towards her or watched for enemy reinforcements. Just what the hell was going on? In her peripheral vision, another door opened on the opposite side of the room and she felt drawn to it. It was the same feeling she received when the gravity lift had pulled her up. "Cortana did youâ€"never mind. Valor, Hartmann, on me," she muttered none too nicely and went to said door.

"Lieutenant that door leads toâ€" The synthetic woman started, but paused as the Spartan stopped.

"I'm well aware," she managed between gritted teeth and shook her head to stop the strange anger that was building within the more she talked to the AI. Turning her attention to the Master Chief, she pointed a finger at another door. He nodded silently, understanding. "Get moving, Chief. Radio in if you see anything out of order. As for the rest of you, I'll need two more volunteers." Two Shock Troopers instantly raised their weapons. She nodded, a brow dipping slightly. "Come with me then. Alpha team, follow the Master Chief. When he says jump, you ask how high. Is that understood?"

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" They replied in unison. She only nodded as she moved towards the door. "If we find the Captain, we'll radio in. Move out!" The Chief's gaze lingered on her for a second more as she jogged with her team into the corridor on one side of the room. He knew that something wasn't right, but he brushed it off as being anxious about the Captain. He signaled for his team to move out as well and they easily complied, following him and not giving any trouble about whom or what he was.

\* \* \*



><p>"Radar says everything's all clear ma'am," Hartmann murmured over the com. The Lieutenant moved her steely gaze down the long hallway that stretched in front of them. It was odd being inside a Covenant Battle Cruiserâ€"especially this one. The closest she had ever come to being near a Covenant ship of this magnitude was on the Corvette. The first thing that caught her eye was the amount of colors: majorelle blue, ruby, amaranth, and plum. Colors were something she always cherished since she was a child and she had to agree that the colors made her head spin in a pleasant, hypnotic way. Why couldn't the UNSC be as enthusiastic when it came to color scheme? Perhaps a bit of cobalt; blue was her favorite. Then there were the rounded hulls and sharp angles of the doors. Everything was strange in the most intoxicating way here. "Alright then, stay close. Take caution; we have doors surrounding us and Lord knows when they might open or where they might lead. Hartmann, Valor I want you on my three and nine." Mumbling responses to confirm her order, they took their positions. "Galvez, Smith ease up. Watch our six." The two men nodded and moved back a few feet, guns armed and aimed, checking their corners. When everyone was in position, LT raised her shotgun (given as a gift from Valor) and pointed two fingers down the hall. "Move out, nice and easy. Stay quiet," she turned her head towards her Helljumper friend. "If it's possible." He deactivated his visor, grinning wide and see-sawed his hand at her in the most childish manner. She turned back to the seemingly endless hall and descended down it, her footsteps extremely light (seeing that she was the heaviest person on the team). Her Helljumpers followed suit, their boots creating soft clicks against the tile beneath them.<p>

Delta Air paused as they came to the end of the hall and had to make a choice. Left path or right path? The Lieutenant chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, shotgun rested against her shoulder as she looked down the left path, then the right. She turned back to Hartmann. "Ideas?" He hummed in concentration as he stared down at his data pad unsure of which way they should choose.

"I don't know, Boss Lady. Haven't got enough Intel to say for sure. I have maps to certain rooms, like the holding cells, butâ€| I don't know. Some of this damn map is just missing a lot of parts. Important parts and nowâ€|" He sighed heavily, giving the delicate pad a fierce shake. Hartmann looked to the Lieutenant for guidance.

"It's alright. We still have a form of navigationâ€|" she responded coolly and all of the men behind her gave a questioning look; all except Valor, who grinned and nodded.

Hartmann tilted his head curiously. "What might that be, ma'am?"

Valor growled happily and the dumbstruck soldiers turned their stares on him. "We're navigating on gut feeling. Lupo here is going to wing it."

The Lieutenant nodded and looked down the left hallway and swung her head around to examine the right once more. She couldn't decide; everything in the damn abomination looked the same. A flicker of red appeared in her peripheral vision and disappeared down the left hall. She turned; blinking a few times to make sure she still had a grip on her sanity, she pointed two slender fingers in the direction the image had gone. "Down here, let's move. I want you in the same

positions." Not bothering to look back for acknowledgements, the LT advanced down the left hall, disturbingly aware of every door that appeared. It was eerie, for lack of better vocabulary.

Out of all of the men, however, Valor was the most confident. He would give an occasional boorish grin, but he seemed so genuinely happy to have the chance to assault an enemy Battle Cruiser. Maybe it was the fact that instead of the Covenant assaulting them, they were assaulting the Covenant. It made his lips twitch into that same grin that just meant he was up to no good; which he never was, of course. He glanced over at Hartmann and internally scolded him for his stance. It was too broad; a Grunt could easily kick him in theâ€|what had Johnson called them? UPS package. Apparently they were a continuous mailing service back on earth. Nick had no idea why Johnson found it so funny to relate a man's jewels to a damned mailing service. Crazy old man.

There was movement ahead and Valor tapped the Spartan on the shoulder, gesturing to the corner they were about to go around. She nodded and signaled everyone to stop. Her fingers pointed at Valor and then aimed at the hallway. As she strained her ears, she could distinctly make out a scuffling sound; Grunts. Her hand was low at her side and Valor nodded in understanding, pulling his rifle over his shoulder and gripping his pistol instead. He peaked around the corner and saw the back of a methane tank and flashed a devil grin. Night, night little bastard. Aiming at the methane tank, he pulled the trigger twice and only twice, then pulled back into cover. The Grunt wailed and shook its arms viciously as its tank hissed and green gas left it in a rush. It ran into the wall and the tank exploded on impact leaving five very satisfied marines.

LT signaled for Valor to check again. The Helljumper leaned out of cover and saw a very pissed off elite heading their way. Well I'll be damned. He pulled away as quickly as humanly possible and looked at the Lieutenant, raising his arm into the air to show what he saw. It was caught in a death grip and he growled, twisting his body to look at said elite. It snarled; all four of its mandibles stretched as a plasma dagger appeared. His eyes widened before he could get a hold of himself. Searing pain was felt across his back and Valor lurched forward, gritting his teeth and refusing to cry. He patted himself down and finally found his knife. Ignoring the pain that blazed like fire, Valor managed to jab the tip of the knife into the alien's head. His gift was the strangled roar of both annoyance and pain.

The Lieutenant moved immediately. She kicked out a leg at the elite and it staggered backwards, losing its grip on Valor. The man fell to the ground, nearly screaming in pain. "Hartmann take care of him! Galvez and Smith; support fire!" The words flew from her lips so fast that the marines barely caught them and with a moment's hesitation finally did as told. There was blaze of fury burning in her head as the LT fired her sniper rifle at close range. It wasn't the best idea of course, with so little space; ships were always tight quarters. But that's all she could do as she charged forward, exiting a full clip into the eight foot beast. It roared and wielded an energy sword, activating the weapon at once. The Spartan cursed and jumped back from what would have been a beheading. Galvez and Smith fired their MA5s at point blank. The elite roared as it slumped against the wall, leaving a trail of blood on it. The Helljumpers exhaled a breath they hadn't realized they were holding. The Lieutenant stared

at the body for a moment before turning sharply when she heard a hiss of pain. Hartmann had taken off of his helmet, making Valor do the same and tried to clean and seal the wound that blazing across his back. The Spartan gritted her teeth and felt fear run through her...Fear? When had she ever been afraid? It made sense to be concerned for her comrades, but afraid? This was unacceptable.

\* \* \*

><p>"Get to cover!" The Master Chief growled as he leaned against a crate. The ODS Ts shouted back replies as they fell back and waited. The Chief observed the docking the area from his position. When his eyes settled on a pile of ammo and health packs, he allowed himself brief appraisal. He signaled two men ahead and left the rest to stay behind with support fire. Moving ahead, he weaved through the crates and the marines took note of this instantly, mimicking his movements. He turned and squeezed his trigger when the sound of scuffling reached his ears. The Grunt fell back with a sharp cry, hitting the floor. He motioned for one of the two marines near him to grab the supplies.<p>

Slowly, the Helljumper counted out how many supplies his arms could hold. Just as he was about to spring from behind the crate, a knot in the pit of his stomach formed. He knew what that meant. The marine stuck his hand out instead and pulled it back quickly as a rod flew past. It lodged into the metal of the floor five yards away and shattered. He turned back to the Chief and pointed above.

"We have a sniper, sir."

The Chief was taken back at how the man had handled himself and how calm he seemed, regardless of the fact that his hand was nearly cut off. "Understood. Everyone \_stay in cover\_. Sergeant Johnson, can you get a visual?"

Grunting, Johnson steadied the barrel of his gun and caught sight of a jackal one floor above them. "I have visual, sir. Permission to smoke this ugly SOB?"

"Not yet." The Chief eyed the jackal for a moment and turned his attention to the Helljumper he would need to thank later. The Spartan tapped his neck once they caught each other's eyes.

"Gunnery Chief Adrian Hawk, sir."

"I need you to cover Johnson if his cover is blown."

"Roger that, Spartan."

Giving one last glance at the Covenant perched at the edge of the walkway, the seven feet mass of man hefted himself onto the same crate he ducked behind and began to make his way to the supplies. The jackal screeched, obviously annoyed, as it fired shot after terribly aimed shot. Johnson leveled his barrel as Hawk watched the jackal watch the Chief. The man in the drab green armor was incredibly fast as he jumped from crate to crate. Chancing a glance at the gunnery chief, Johnson hesitated; Hawk took another second to stare at the jackal, then turned sharply to the Sergeant and angrily punched the air. He didn't need to be told twice. The eye of the creature was in his cross-hairs. Exhaling, Johnson skillfully pulled the trigger

and braced himself as the impact rocketed through his frame. Blood splattered against the wall and the dark skinned man gave a merciless grin. That wasn't an easy shotâ€”something he made himself full aware of and snickered quietly.

Hawk watched as the Chief picked up a few medical kits and rounds for ammo. He signaled for the men to come over and began to disperse them each with a small amount of the prize. Once everything was passed out, the group moved into the second half of the area. Chief paused as he checked their surroundings; there was a Covenant Wraith Tank (which he had a sneaking suspicion the Lieutenant knew how to operate) and more crates scattered about. That provided the opposing side with an advantage. Moving as quickly and quietly as possible, they moved into the second half of the docking bay. Sierra 117 stopped mid stride and turned his MA5B to the door that opened. Aliens poured into the area and the male ground his teeth together. Giving nothing but a mere shout to get to cover, the Chief marched two steps ahead and gave automatic fire.

He heard a scream somewhere to the right of him and saw an ODS Sergeant drop to the ground, seething pain as the green plasma ate away at his calves.

"Hawk, I have one man down. Position?" He barked as he pulled the sergeant from the ground and placed each of them behind the Wraith tank.

"Over here, sir!" The Master Chief glanced around the tank and spotted the gunnery chief waving his hand as he stood near a pillar that reached the ceiling.

"How experienced are you with medical procedures?"

"I have basic training sir, but plasmaâ€”"

"Irrelevant. I know that the plasma burns are going to leave scars. But if I don't take care of this bastardsâ€”" The unmistakable shot of the sniper rifle and a string of curses coming from Johnson seemed to prove his point. The Chief sighed, biting back his amusement. "They'll flank us."

"Understood sir; what do you need me to do?" The endless amount of respect that Hawk sent his way was expectedâ€”as it was with any marine. But the Chief couldn't help the great deal of respect he felt for the gunnery as well. He would have to buy him a drink or cigar someday.

"I need you to advance on my position. If I move the Sergeantâ€”|" He trailed off, leaving the imagination to the lower ranked soldier.

"I hear you, Spartan, loud and clear."

"Good, I was hoping you didn't miss that." There was a short chuckle on the com and then the quick scuffling of military issued boots as Hawk dodged needles and plasma rifles. He crouched and rolled to their position in record time. Settling into a kneeling position, Hawk held up the medical kit he received not to long before. The Chief didn't waste any time; he automatically stepped into the spray, taking some of the attention away from the remaining marines.

His shields had dropped to forty-seven percent by the time he leaned against Hawk's pillar. Posture perfectly straight, he slide one foot to poke around the metal beam—he looked down as he heard something roll at his feet. The sight of the plasma grenade caused him to pause, unsure if it was armed or not. Then Chief realized that its usual hazy blue smoke was not leaking from it. Oh.

"Gunny left them here for you," Cortana explained. "Not that they would be of use. You can't stick it."

Just as he was about to retort the synthetic woman with a response of his own, another female voice crackled over the com. "\_\*\*Sierra one, one, seven this is Sierra three, twelve. We have found Captain Keyes. I repeat; we have \*\*\_\_\*\*found\*\*\_\_\*\* Captain Keyes. I'm requesting reinforcements immediately. Get your men and get over here, NOW.\*\*\_" The com clicked off after the message.

The sound of urgency and—panic. John froze. His mouth hung slightly open partially because of the fact that he was just about to speak to Cortana and mostly because of the fact that the Lieutenant...she sounded \_terrified\_. Absolutely scared out of her damn mind. He had never heard, during the small amount of time that they knew each other, her sound so vulnerable. A strong sense of uneasiness settled into his stomach. It wasn't an emotion he felt in—months? Years? He wasn't sure how long and at the moment, he didn't give a damn. All that matter at the moment was finding her and figuring just what exactly had caused her to sound like that. \_Unless the Captain is severely injured. Could he be in a critical condition? What the hell did those alien bastards do to him?\_ \_Why—why is she so afraid?\_

He needed to find her. That was his top priority. Now wasn't the time to tango and the Covenant would only understand this from one being; Sergeant Major Avery Johnson. Just as the thought swept through his mind, the \_crack!\_ sound of the sniper rifle picked up once more. \_Well, that was easy \_thought \_then done. \_The Chief smirked at his terribly failed attempt at a joke and picked up one a fragmentation grenade, pulled the pin (while counting to three) and released it, rolling it under the shield of a jackal.

"Grenade thrown!"

Everyone ducked behind cover, while Johnson pulled his head back, barrel of the rifle sticking obnoxiously from behind the closed crate. There was a loud explosion and even louder screeching. Johnson knew this trick; the Sergeant and the Master Chief had used this strategy plenty of times. Leaning out and putting all of his weight on his left leg, Johnson aimed at an elite flexing its mandibles frantically and pulled the trigger. Blood sprayed as the non-human body fell back. There was a wide line of fire from the MA5B held by the Spartan as he moved forward, ducking behind every crate near to him. Johnson advanced as well; mimicking the actions in the same pattern, except his process was much slower. This was because of the fact that he had a long range weapon and the Chief relied on him to give support fire. A very old, 'by-the-book' tactic in the military, but it got the job done, nonetheless.

The Helljumpers, soon recognizing what the two men were trying to perform, followed suit (excusing Hawk and the sergeant in pain). The

remaining soldiers moved down the center, rifles aimed as they fired short, controlled bursts. Within fifteen minutes all enemies were eliminated and Cortana, once again, performed an override on a door placed on the farthest wall of the docking bay.

"\_We should move through \_now," she warned over the com as the door slid open slower than usual. "\_I can't guarantee that it will not lock again once we're inside.\_"

"Understood," the Chief replied as he glanced back at Hawk and the partially treated Sergeant. Hawk gave a sharp nod, answering the unspoken question. The injured man had one arm strung across Hawk's wide shoulders as his right hand tightly gripped a pistol. The Chief knew he could feel the burning sting of pain now and then. However, the fact that Hawk reduced it to that much proved the gunny's skill with medical supplies. And even with his minor experience, it proved to be a difficult task with even the highly trained field doctors and medics.

Turning to his team, the Chief examined each and every one of the men. Giving a short nod, he spoke in a clear, collected voice that made it clear no one was to argue with him: "We've received word that Delta Air team may have possibly found Captain Keyes. This is just a mere possibility though, they're not entirely sure if it's truly the Captain or perhaps a Covenant hoax. Nevertheless, we need to find out for sure. They are requesting for reinforcements, which we will provide generously. This isn't the time to let emotions lead you; remain clam, check your corners. We're in tight quarters so we don't have room to maneuver. Watch each other's backs. Am I understood?"

The men saluted and gave a '\_Yes sir!\_', as they followed the Spartan into the next hallway, already expecting a flocking storm of trouble. What they didn't expect though was the faint flickering of crimson that flashed across each panel bolted to a hull. None of them seemed to notice this detailâ€|except for Cortana.

\* \* \*

><p>Walking along the wall, Spartan three twelve pressed two, keen fangs sinking into the flesh of her lower lip. She couldn't bring herself to look at Valorâ€"or anyone else for that matterâ€"in the eye. All she could stare at was his boots and nothing more. Every time she glanced at her teammates, the warm, stinging sensation of panic and fear trickled from her brain along her spine, and curled its way into her stomach. Neverâ€"<em>never<em>â€"had she felt so strongly. It was strange and she couldn't stand the way her hands quivered against her rifle; anticipating the thrumming thrill of the kill yet dreading the moment when she would have to pull the trigger with blood splattering in the wake of the impact. All she needed to do was breathe. Calm, collected, \_slow\_ breaths surged through her nostrils and smoothly left her mouth as they marched.

"You alright, ma'am?" Valor murmured over the private com he established between the pair. The ordinary person wouldn't have notice the slight stutter in the Spartan's steps or the way her biceps flexed (even under her armor) as the ability to keep herself from breaking her weapon weakened. The typical human wouldn't have noticed this, but Valor, only knowing the Lieutenant for about three days and being far from typical, knew that something was giving her a

run for her moneyâ€"so to speak.

"Pretty ironic question, don't you think?"

He grinned as he stared at her intently. "Eh, I was best-known for my ironic stupidity back in training. It really made me a favorite amongst the ladies," he chuckled, remembering how the few female Helljumpers would watch him with bright eyes and parted lips.

"\_Was?\_ Last I recall, Warrant Officer, you're still diagnosed with the case of 'ironic stupidity'."

"\_Ooh\_, \_ouch! \_That's my pride you just shoved a twelve gauge through there," he feigned in an agonizing voice.

"My apologizes; I'll try to shove it a little deeper next time so the pain is just numbing."

"Aw, for me? You're really too kindâ€"\_thank you!\_"

They laughed a little louder than what was necessary, but neither soldier seemed to care. The Lieutenant felt like it was a bit easier to breathe in her helmet and she smiled, knowing that she had found a good, familiar friendship in the man known as Nick Valor.

"Thank you for that," she murmured.

"No thanks needed. A \_servitore\_ should always grace her \_maestÃ \_ with endless generosity."

"Didâ€|you just call me a queen?"

Chuckling, he responded with a coolness that didn't match the flush of embarrassment on his face: "Ah, I said \_maestÃ \_, which means majesty. Not exactly queen, but close enough, Lupo. I'm impressed. Hasn't it only been a day or two since your lessons in the language of the olive skinned people?"

"I wasn't making a joke when I said that I have high intelligence."

Just as he laughed, a sharp pain ran across his back and he jerked forward, groaning and gritting his teeth. She stopped at once, turning sharply on her heel and advancing towards the smaller frame. Hartmann barely had time to register what just happened before his fallen comrade was gently (yet incredibly quickly) yanked from his hands and brought to the ground. Valor growled under his breath, gripping onto every last piece of ease he could as he felt another layer of bio-foam cover his mark. It was going to scar, no doubt about that. He wiggled slightly, wincing at the minute stabs of pain that echoed across his skin as a result. Struggling to pull himself to his feet, he looked up at the Lieutenant. Surprise was an understatement. His mouth formed into a confused 'o' as he watched her watch him. Originally Valor thought it was Hartmann whom pulled his sorry ass down.

The Spartan simply nodded as she ignored the constant shaking in her hands. She moved back to her position at the head of Galvez and Smith, walking down a corridor that held about fifteen doors on each

side. Pausing, she took a moment to survey the area. It was silent and empty—this held two possible meanings; the first being that Beta Ground team had succeed in drawing the attention of the Covenant (this also put an abundance of heavy fire onto their shoulders) and the second was really simply put. Either the Covenant hadn't noticed anything and the soldiers were about to run into a group of said aliens out of the blue or they were aware of Delta team's location and was setting a trap as they spoke. Neither outcome was acceptable, but it wasn't like the Lieutenant could pick and choose for them. Whatever we encounter, we'll be ready for, she growled stubbornly in her head.

This time, they moved at a hasty pace. A solid, unfamiliar feeling nestled its way into LT's stomach. Alert once more, her rifle was raised a tad too high and she exhaled slowly as the nervous energy seemed to bounce around in her suit. I need to calm down. I can't act like this; not now. Not while Captain Keyes is at risk. Remember what you fight for. Put the fear aside and march. March into battle with your head held high, your rifle under your fingers, and your eyes sharp. Show no fear, feel no fear, destroy fear. It does not exist. It is not a real emotion. You are a Spartan. You will fight for those who cannot and you will fight for those who do not want to be fought for. Nodding, feeling much more certain of herself than she was before, the Lieutenant paused at one door in particular.

Every color was the same of course, yet it was the minutest detail that caught her attention; instead of the same swirled and angled insignia that marked every door that had been encountered and passed through, the one on the door were all curves. It was also rather large too, she noticed. In fact, instead of remaining on one of the panels, it was painted across all four. This must have meant that there was something inside or it was a room that the usual Covenant 'staff' was not permitted to go through.

"That doesn't explain why there isn't anyone here to guard the door though. That might mean there's trouble inside," she mumbled to herself in deep thought, her pointing to each side of the door at once. Galvez and Smith moved into position. She signaled Hartmann to take Valor and himself around the corner in case there were a handful of enemy forces they couldn't handle. All of the possibilities ran through her mind at blinding speed; Hunters, Jackals with sniper rifles, Elites, Spec Op Elites, Commando Elites, Ranger Elites—Grunts. With an internal shake of her head, she moved back to kneel beside Galvez on the left side. The circular controls pulsed a vibrant India green. A small smile appeared on her marred face. The Lieutenant was ready, no matter what her stomach continued to tell her.

\*\*Ah, so I see you have succeeded in finding Captain Jacob Keyes. Well done. I 'm rather impressed. And I'm \*\*never\*\* impressed. Although, just to give a warning—though this doesn't mean I want to help you—there \*\*are\*\* reinforcements inside, as well as the Captain. Neither party seems to be pleased. \*\*

Her eyes widened as she froze in place, ready to launch at the door. How—just what was going on? Was this a new tactic of the Covenant? Did they find a way to hack into the internal speakers of her helmet? That was impossible though; their AIs just weren't advanced enough (they could hack and perform other duties—just not as well as the



standard UNSC artificial intelligence) to try and decrypt through the firewall encasing she had installed in her helmet to avoid such confrontations. Unless—was it possible that they had captured a UNSC AI? But how would that AI know anything about the Mark V armor suit components and how to interphase with them?

\*\*Name: Invalid. Date of Birth: Invalid. Age: Invalid. Rank: Lieutenant. Number: 312. Special Field: Performance is well above standards. Team History: Beta Company, Noble Team... Shall I continue Spartan? \*\*

Whoever—or more accurately, whatever—this thing was, it knew too much about her than she liked. But if it wanted a show, she would be convivial to give just what it wanted. As the LT counted to three in her head, her body set into position; shotgun lowered to the floor in her right hand, body crouched as her left hand twitched in anticipation. It was going to be close quarters; firefights on ships were usually this way. The type of battlefield she favored the most was desert—or just on some flat ground would work too, but—Be careful what you wish for. As she whispered the last number, LT's body jolted (much faster than she was accustomed to) and the door slid open only to reveal about seven sleeping Grunts slumped against pillars.

Stopping immediately, she gave the room a quick once over. On either side of the hull were large rooms with benches bolted inside. A holographic screen blocked access from both the inside and out. The Lieutenant pulled her kukri and proceeded to slit the throat of every grunt in the brig. Moving on from the task, she called in Hartmann and Valor who froze once they entered. They hadn't been expecting the piles of blood cautiously oozing from the pint-sized aliens. And yet here they were, staring at the scene with wide, slightly horrified eyes. Whatever had crawled up the Spartan's ass—they did not want to piss her off any more than what she already felt. Although Valor felt the nagging temptation to bombard her with questions and comments, he kept his mouth closed (which took a great deal of effort seeing that he bit his own lip until it bruised and bled).

Turning swiftly back to the door, her emotionless voice echoed out to Galvez and Smith: "Guard the door. We're going to try and release Captain Keyes."

A particular cell at the end caught her eye. Slumped against the wall was a body—she rushed over, placing a hand on the holographic screen watching the man intently as her helmet scanned over him, displaying numbers on her HUD. The Lieutenant exhaled in relief; he was alive, but injured. But he was alive and that's what was significant. The only problem was bringing him back alive. Taking a glance at the door, she saw that it was closed. There wasn't any news from Galvez and Smith yet—

"Galvez, Smith. What's your position looking like?" Came the leader's tone.

"Everything is clear out here, ma'am. Nothing more"—\*\*ARGH!\*\*—" There was a burst of white noise over the intercom before it shut off completely and the green panels on the door turned a vicious red.

"Galvez! Galvez, report, what just happened?!" She marched towards

the door and Valor growled at Hartmann when the man wouldn't let him follow. "Smith? Can you hear me?" When she received no answer, a fist slammed into the door. Pain crackled over that hand as the Lieutenant glared at the ground. There must have been more than they predicted. Slowly, the LT took a step back and turned her gaze to the platform and the controls that was bolted to it. Valor gazed at her as she walked (literally walked) very slowly to the platform. Her feet carried her until she was directly in front of the cell controls. Without warning, her slim fingers slipped to the seals on her helmet.

The Helljumpers, without noticing, held their breath as the helmet was slipped over her head. Fierce—intensely fierce and angry—chemically blue eyes stared at nothing in particular. Her hair was longer than regulations allowed; it was all tossed to the right side in the style of a mo-hawk, the left side remaining shaved. Scars went over her eye, lip, along her cheek. Jaw set in what must have been a painful lock, her hand opened and dropped the helmet Valor had quickly come to know and love. Her fingers rose to the panels and pressed a few before the holographic shields lowered to each and every cell. Instantly, she was inside the Captain's cell, pulling medical materials from her back pouch. Blood stained his marine clothing making LT distantly wonder just where he was going. Perhaps he had tried to find food or a water resource for the crew. Maybe it was better if she didn't know at all; it wasn't like it was a requirement. It wasn't a piece of information that would help her clean and heal these wounds that encased most of his body.

Hartmann and Valor poked their heads in, watching the kneeling form. "You need any help, Lupo?"

The Lieutenant shook her head and muttered a 'thanks anyway' as she pulled a bottle of disinfectant from her pouch. She leaned close to Captain Keyes, her fingers against a still bleeding wound on his shoulder and—her back arched as pain sparked and trickled down her spine. Growling and grinding her teeth together in agony, the Lieutenant stood, backing away from the Captain, as if he were the one to cause it. Which he was. The men in the room didn't know what exactly to do as thin, crimson circles (that seemed to look like her shields recharging) made their way down her body and back up again. A short gasp escaped her as she backed out of the room. Valor and Hartmann watched in horror as the woman before them dropped to one knee, fist slammed into the ground to keep herself steady. Even though the cut across his back was healing, Valor had to grit his teeth at the intense stab of pain he felt in his chest as he watched on.

Short gasps escaped the Spartan. She didn't know how much longer of this she could take and to be honest, she considered the idea of just putting a bullet in her head. Suddenly, as if something could hear her thoughts, the rings stopped where they were and hovered before vanishing completely. With a grunt, Valor shuffled towards the Lieutenant and dropped to his knees as well. Her head had not lifted even with the close proximity of the presence beside her. The man leaned forward—eyes intrigued by her face, her closed eyes, the scar that ran down her cheek—his palm coming up to place on her cheek when she suddenly straight upwards.

"SHIT!" Valor cursed, his hand that was ready to help before now placed over his heart. Hazel eyes locked with chemical blue and a

silent conversation went between them. Growling low in his throat, the man nodded and watched as the LT struggled in the slightest to get to her feet. "Bellona?"

Her head turned to look over her shoulder. A ghost of a smile played on her lips. He could only sigh as she turned back again, picked up her helmet, sealing it over her head once more. Hartmann coughed awkwardly. "Valor tossed a grin over his shoulder. "You gonna' stand there all day? Come help me up dumbass."

Pistol complied, shaking his head in annoyance. "What do you think is waiting for us outside that door? And what the hell just happened with the Lieutenant's armor? Isn't it supposed to be 'untouchable' or some shit? And who the hell is Bellona?"

Valor just grumbled low in his throat as his eye twitched at Hartmann's rather annoying questions. "Well if you're so damned curious"

"\*\*That is enough, Officer Valor.\*\*"

Hazel eyes snapped up at the synthetic male voice and settled onto the image of a humanoid male hovering above the prison cell controls. There a distinct feeling of déjà vu stirring in Valor's mind when his face brightened suddenly and he exclaimed, "\_Ohhh yeahhh! \_It's that AI! Long time no see Chucky!"

And with that simple statement, chaos ensued.

\* \* \*

><p>The Chief came to a screeching halt once he saw the already opened doors. That obviously wasn't a good sign. But it wasn't unexpected. "the Lieutenant called for reinforcements because the Covenant had them pinned down. After arguing in his head for a moment, he decided that it made sense for the elite with golden rod armor to sit at the head of the room in a floating chair. What made his mind begin to plot and plan wasn't that simple yet significant detail. "it was the lack of elites in the room that concerned him the most. The very few that were scattered about were of no specific class. Frowning, the Chief surveyed the room once more. He ended with the same observations. He did this three more times, surveying the room carefully, until he finally stopped the internal battle with himself. <em>They must have sent the infiltration to deal with the Lieutenant.<em>

"Cortana. "are you seeing this?" His voice was a bit lower than usual.

"Yes. It seems that they have sent the Infiltration team. They are most likely already engaged with them. "after all, these elites are not known to take their time."

He sighed softly as he turned the information over in his head. "Have you heard anything from her or the rest of the team?"

After a momentary silence she replied, "Nothing. I am still receiving a beacon however."

The Spartan straightened his position. "Beacon? They shouldn't have a

beacon up; the Covenant can easily see and find it, especially in a ship."

"Noâ€|this oneâ€|is different." Cortana sounded like she was in awe, but there was an undertone of emotion; a tip of the iceberg that lay under water.

"How is it different?"

"It'sâ€|It'sâ€|" She couldn't find the words, she could only view data, analyze, store said data, then find a new piece and repeat. It was hard to believe that anything could perform such a task in a matter of milliseconds. But Cortana is a machineâ€|there are very few things that she cannot do. "The Lieutenant! We have to find her Chiefâ€|"we \_need\_ to find her \_now\_, take the Captain, and exit this ship at once!"

"Slow downâ€|"you're losing me here. \_Where are the Lieutenant and the Captain?\_"

"Iâ€|where the beacon is transmitting from. There isn't much time to explain!" The panic was evident in her voice.

It wouldn't be easy to just up and leave the cockpit full of aliensâ€|"\_alive\_". This specifically applied to the elite clad in golden rod armor sitting at the head of the pit. If the problem wasn't dealt with at that moment, then they would probably have to deal with it later; possibly when they would attempt an escape. The key word being: attempt. Lastly, there didn't seem to be another short route for them to take. All of these inferences presented the Chief with two valid reasons.

"We can't just leave now," he argued, taking on a rather logical tone. "There's no way we can sneak past this door without catching someone's attention. We need a distraction."

Taking this into account, the AI nodded in agreement, regardless of the fact the Chief couldn't see her perform the action. "I'll patch myself into the network. Give me a moment."

"Alright," the Chief muttered as he adjusted the scope on his sniper rifle to 10x. He made another sweep of the room, taking in minor details.

"\_There\_," she said, obviously proud with herself. "I've placed a false beacon in another vector in the ship. Hopefully it'll distract them long enough for us to escape."

"And if they find out the beacon isn't legitimate?"

"Then that's our queue to run like hell," she replied smoothly. "Now, let's go find the Lieutenant and Captain Keyes."

"Good work. Also keep in mind that if we \_do\_ need to run like hell, it would help for you to shut some doors behind us and cover our tracks."

She chuckled softly as she retorted, "Will do, Chief."

Signaling to the rest of the men to follow, they walked down the

corridor. The Chief couldn't stop the wave of frustration passing through him as they simply continued to walk away from the door. He could have immobilized all six of the elites on his own. And if things escalated, he would have Johnson and Hawk give him support fire. Yet the status of his fellow soldiers is what kept him from turning around—it's what gave him his motivation to keep moving forward. The sooner everyone was found, the sooner they could get off of the ship.

It was already starting to make his skin itch. Somewhere in the back of his head an image of Sam smiling broadly appeared and the Chief closed his eyes and opened them. He was glad he didn't look back that day. He didn't have any regrets except for the most obvious; sending your own men to their deaths wasn't an easy task even for the most highly decorated officer to have ever lived. He didn't regret sending Sam to his death; he regretted not dying with his brother and teammate. Tired eyes narrowed in determination as the past faded and reality seeped into vision. Moving forward was what he needed to do. And like everything else Spartan 117 has attempted to do in his life as a bio-engineered human, he would succeed in doing so.

\* \* \*

><p>"My *name* is Charles; it is not Charlie or Chuck and it is especially not Chucky or any other variant. Do it again and you \*\*will \*\*regret it!" Charles sneered at Valor, fists balled as he bared his teeth.

Valor cleared his throat, moving his attention elsewhere. "As lovely as ever, mi amico."

"Speak English, for God's sake," the humanoid male muttered, data-streamed eyebrows dipping into a frown. "No one can understand a damn word your saying. I'm not even sure if you know what you're saying."

"Well, Italian is my native language so—"

"I'm unconvinced; it's irrelevant anyway, so drop the subject." Valor gaped at Charles in disbelief as the image turned towards the Lieutenant, eyes glowing brightly in determination.

The Lieutenant stared at Charles, not exactly sure what to do now. A traditional cavalry's hat that dated back to centuries ago hung slightly over his eyes, the cord striped in shining silver. On the top, etched in a deep maroon was the UNSC symbol. The AI's attire was rather simple compared to the hat; he wore a black trench that stuck to his form, the buttons just as silver as his hat's cord. Underneath was a white form fitting shirt that was usually worn when marines put on their armor. His pants were sinister ebony, his legs armored from his knee caps down. He looked to be about in his twenties, perhaps twenty-five. The expression on the AI's face was stern and the Lieutenant could read the message loud and clear as if he were saying the words aloud; you want to start something you can't finish?

Charles shoved his hands into coat pockets, rosewood data streams traveling down said coat in angular shapes and lines. He lifted his head slightly, as if he was sniffing the air before flashing a man-eating grin as he registered the Captain that had begun to stir

behind her. Blinking twice, the LT turned immediately and rushed towards Keyes as he leaned over and coughed heavily into his bruised hands. After the fit he groaned and set a loose fist over his stomach, eyes closing as he sought to keep the pain from overtaking his conscious.

"Captain," LT spoke urgently. "Are you alright? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Keyes opened his eyes slowly and lifted his head meeting the glossed duplicate of himself encased in a blend of fire. His brows furrowed and with another grunt, he managed to pull himself onto the bench in the cell. "I'm fine, Lieutenant, thank you," he grumbled, his voice a hushed whisper and his throat as arid as the Sahara itself. Keyes did a double-take; the Lieutenant was in here, in an enemy ship with no back up whatsoeverâ€”

"Captain! Good to see you kicking, sir!" Valor called from the doorway, waving his hand frantically, much to Hartmann's displeasure.

"Will you cut out that moving shit?! You're as heavy as a god damned Hunter, you fat ass!" He yelled and the Lieutenant could only sigh as she went to work on sealing the Captain's wounds.

"Who you callin' a fat ass?! I'm as fit as a damn dog!" Valor growled as he shoved his head against Hartmann's in challenge.

Hartmann shoved back, his anger rising with each word he spoke and action he performed. "If you don't shut the hell upâ€”!"

"What? You gonna try and stab me with that knife of yours? OH WAIT! An elite already tried that; didn't seem to work out too well, if I recall correctly. 'Sides, I think you're too much of a wuss to start anything, \_Hartmann\_."

"Enough!" They both observed their leader with wide eyes and she could see the withheld anger course within them. "We don't have time to argue; we need to get the Captain out of here." At the sound of his name, Keyes grunted, eyes fixing on the Lieutenant to give her a harsh glare. The Spartan paused and sighed just softly enough so the Captain couldn't hear; he didn't like the idea of being the damsel in distress and he disliked being rescued with a sincere passion.

Keyes straightened his slumped posture and turned his hard glare on the other marines (with the result being two cringing men) before turning once again to the Lieutenant. "You should not have come here in the first place, Lieutenant."

"All due respect sir; we never leave a soldier if he's in trouble." Valor and Hartmann nodded from afar and the former chuckled softly as Keyes' eyes widened comically. The Lieutenant applied the last of ointment to the three marks against the Captain's chest and stood, holding her hand out. The Captain looked at her hand and a small smile appeared. So she \_did\_ \_meet\_ her.

Taking her hand, the captain of the \_Autumn\_ was gently hefted upwards and handed a Covenant Needler. The Lieutenant nodded as his bruised fingers slipped into the proper slot. He gripped her arm with his available hand and slowly limped with her out of the cell. He

jolted to a stop once his eyes took in the form of the AI hovering above the cell door controls. "Charles? Just what the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Charles turned his silver eyes to him and they narrowed at once. "I don't believe that I am authorized to tell you, Captain." Keyes bristled from the retort and his greyed eyebrows lowered into a grimace. The AI smirked and shifted his gaze to the Spartan beside the captain. "When you arrived at Dr. Halsey's labâ€"

"That's classified," she interrupted, risking a glance at two very confused Helljumpers. Charles simply shrugged and continued anyway, letting her warning roll off of him.

"As I was saying; when you arrived at Dr. Halsey's lab on Reach, I was contained, but only partially. After you retrieved the package, I uploaded myself into your suit's system and nowâ€|I'm here." He paused and looked over at the door before turning back once again. "We need to get out of here. I already rallied in the others. Cortana and the Master Chief should be on their way."

"You are in direct violation of code, Charles," the eldest man in the room said and the others were clearly shocked by how calm, cool, and not-pissed-off he sounded. He shook his head and gave the synthetic male a once over. Seeming to come to a decision, Keyes nodded and looked towards the Lieutenant. "He's extremely dangerous and has the tendency to kill, psychologically scar, or potentially disrupt missions." Tired, experienced grey-blue eyes drifted towards the Lieutenant. "A number of those soldiers were Spartans. I distinctly remember handing you over to Command."

"And I distinctly remember being handed over to Dr. Halsey where I was altered and upgraded, then tested in a mission that went wrong. Details will be provided later, though. We need to get out of here." Charles disappeared for all of three secondsâ€"fading into the control panelâ€"and reappeared, a smile stretching his holographic features. "There's still a ship in the cargo bay. If we can move quickly enough, we can get the hell out of here along with the rest of the team. We have to move our asses thoughâ€"the AI for this ship is slightly damaged, but can still communicate with the ship-board com." He exhaled slowly and stared at the door in his peripheral vision. "Three, two, oneâ€|"

The door slid open and the Master Chief halted in his steps, looking at everyone in the room. He frowned as he took in Charles. He felt the similar warmth of Cortana inside his neural implant begin to rise until it was a blazing ache in the back of his skull. 'Pissed off' was much of an understatement as to how the woman was feeling at the moment.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing Charles?!" She roared. Chief automatically turned down the volume on his outer speakers when he saw the three men visibly wince at the octave.

"How about we save the bitching for later, hm? We need to haul our asses out of this joyful amusement park."

As much as he hated to do it, Keyes agreed and gave the Lieutenant a strong grip on the arm. She nodded and helped him shuffle to the front of platform. Clearing his throat, he addressed both the

Spartans and Cortana: "Coming here was reckless; you could have gotten yourselves killed," he gave a harsh glare, before sighing and allowing a small smile to show. "Thank you."

"You can always repay us later Captain," the Lieutenant mocked and Keyes chuckled as he shifted his weight from one foot to other. "Howeverâ€|"

He nodded and looked back at Charles for a moment. "We'll get going. Butâ€|Charles if I bring you with usâ€|do you promise to help us?"

Silver eyes narrowed and Charles smirked under his hat. "Yes, sir. I mean, if you let me out to have a little fun."

"I'm being serious here," the captain sternly retorted and nodded at the Spartan III. "Grab him and let's get the hell out of here."

"She can't, sir," Cortana finally said and Keyes didn't bother to hide the confusion on his face. If she was half the soldier the Master Chief was, what did it matter about putting an AI in her storage unit? "And why the hell not?"

"The Lieutenant isn't augmented to have an AI."

"Not someone like you, Cortana. But I will work perfectly for her." The image of Charles shimmered. "Hold out your hand, Lieutenant."

"Are you sure?" Keyes asked her and the Lieutenant glanced down at the smaller form. She nodded once. "Sir, yes sir." Without further ado, she reached her available arm upwards. Charles smiled and leaned forward as he whispered: "\_I would rather persuade a man to go along because once I have persuaded him, he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.\_" Just as he whispered word, his hand reached forward and touched the Lieutenant's, the image of the soldier disappearing almost immediately. She shivered slightly at the cool feeling that seemed to fill her head and blinked several times to compose herself.

"You alright, Lupo?" Valor called and she smiled. The Spartan turned to everyone else and made no indication as to whether she was unharmed or harmed.

"I swear; if he doesn't stop with the god damned drooling, I'm going to strangle him," Charles muttered none too quietly over her outer speakers. LT simply shook her head.

"I'm fine Valor. Let's just get out of hereâ€|Wait, Chief, where's the rest of the team?"

"In the other brig; I told them to hold position while I come to get you guys," One seventeen explained and the Lieutenant could only nod.

"Let's get them first, then." She bent slightly, sliding one arm under the Captain's knees while her right arm wrapped around his torso. "You're going to have to provide us cover."

Keyes moved slightly in her grasp and closed his eyes tight to keep



the sharp sensation of pain from overriding his senses. After his breathing slowed, he looked into the Lieutenant's visor about to argue, but froze. In addition to the pale blend of colors was an equally pale streak of crimson. He shook his head, accepting defeat as he lifted the Needler and trained it on the door. "I'll do what I can with this."

With that, the Spartans, the Helljumpers, the Captain, and the AIs all stepped into the corridor. The Lieutenant grimaced at the torn bodies of Galvez and Smith and sighed as she continued on.

"Now you see why I locked the door," Charles murmured. "You owe me one, Spartan."

"And you owe them two. Don't try to cover this with humor, Charles," snarled the female and he decided to save the argument until later.

There was the occasional grunt or jackal that rounded the corner, but it was merely child's play to the experienced soldiers. The captain himself fired off a few needles at an oblivious grunt passing before them, earning a good-hearted chuckle from Valor.

\* \* \*

><p>Hawk cursed under his breath as Mendoza, Johnson and he ran down the corridor. He glanced back at them and met the eyes of the Sergeant and grunted as he viewed the anger there. The Gunny hadn't expected everything to blow to hell like it did. When Cortana locked the doors, she <em>claimed<em> that it couldn't be overridden unless the ship AI was back online or the Covies became patient and rigged the door to explode. A good Helljumper would have expected the latter instead of the former and Hawk didn't enjoy the fact that he had done what he continuously told himself not to; agree with what everyone thought was true.

Thus lead them to the slaughter of Beta ground team and the last remaining soldiers to run like hell. \_Okay, so the elites didn't come as a surprise, but Hunters? REALLY?\_ Hawk rolled his eyes and looked down one end of the corridor to see the Master Chief along with Valor, Hartmann, Captain Keyes, and the Lieutenant. Johnson scoffed in astonishment and as the Gunny shouted over his shoulder, "Come on," they all charged forward to the group of marines, too damn happy to ask questions.

Chief paused for a moment as he caught sight of the three men. He didn't need to ask what happened. His only gave a nod in acknowledgement as he finished off the bleeding elite slumped against the wall.

"Damn, it's good to see you guys. We didn't think we were gonna make it out of there. Captain Keyes! Good to see you aren't to broken up sir," Hawk spoke in a hurried tone and followed them out onto the second level in the hangar.

"Likewise, soldier," the Captain called and looked around for an escape route. Charles chose this time to speak.

"There's a panel over there. Lieutenant, press your hand against it." They watched closely as she gingerly set the Captain onto his feet

and pressed her now free left hand against the panels. Transparent vines of crimes traveled over her hand and the panels changed from orchid and wisteria to same shade of crimson that traveled across her hand. Everyone watched in complete awe as the Lieutenant bowed her head. The vines seemed to give off a hum and she felt a part of herself—her head?—dive into somewhere unfamiliar before a voice pulled her from the deep.

"Override complete; we're clear to go Captain." She blinked slowly as the sensation left her and watched as the door to the cockpit of the Spirit opened and everyone shuffled through. The Chief was the second to last to step as the Lieutenant walked with her back to him and made sure no one tried to follow. Once he was safely inside, she set a foot inside the ship cautiously scanning the area for hostiles. When none could be seen, she turned a full three hundred sixty degrees and—

John's eyes widened as he heard the familiar break of shields and looked back at a bleeding Lieutenant. His face contorted into the expression of absolute horror at the needle lodged into the side of her helmet. He couldn't think—all he could do was act on instinct as he ran forward and pulled her body inside and the door slide shut with a vicious \_snap!\_ He heard Hartmann yelp in surprise and Johnson grumble a curse or two towards the Covenant as the Captain's hands flew over the controls.

"\_Lupo!\_ \_\*\*Shit\*\*\_—”please tell me she'll be okay!" The man in the drab green suit couldn't bring himself to look away from the cracked visor and the blood that had begun to ooze from it.

"Chief—!" Cortana tried, but to no avail. There was a sudden rock and crash of the ship and Keyes managed a harsh apology as he maneuvered the enemy ship out of the cargo bay and into the night. A soft hiss left the Lieutenant and John tilted his head.

"Lieutenant? Can you hear me?" There was a gargled response and John released a breath he didn't know he was hearing. Slowly, he set the Lieutenant against the wall of the cockpit and turned to the rest of them. "I want you in the pilot's room with the Captain—now." The marines saluted and did as told. Valor lingered for a moment, hazel eyes trying so desperately grab her attention. "I'll take care of her. Go on." The Helljumper murmured something and moved into the room, closing the door behind him.

"Chief—her vitals are faltered just slightly. I'm about ninety-two point seven three percent sure that she will recover from this. Now, as for the needle—you should pull it out now instead of letting someone else try to pull it," Cortana tried again and was relieved as he sat on the floor too. There was no point in taking off her helmet—not yet anyway—since the needle stopped anything like that from happening. "Where is it lodged, exactly?" He had an idea, but hoped that it wasn't true for her sake. His hand skimmed over the left side of her helmet and he could hear her mutter something. John examined the projectile carefully.

Cortana watched the Spartan and shook her head as his vitals; his heart was beating at 180 BMP and continued to climb higher. "Her left eye—!" It was at that moment that she noticed how unbelievably quiet Charles was.

"Mm, let's seeâ€¦If I recall correctly, we are in a Covenant Spirit and approaching the make shift baseâ€¦What's that? Oh, yes he's hereâ€¦You dumbass; the captain is flying." Charles sighed at the same the Lieutenant turned her hand, palm faced upwards. He took his chance and appeared on it. A nasty smirk played his synthetic lips. "Well, has it truly been just a year, tin man?"

"What did you do to her?" John growled and Charles tilted his head before smiling. He spread his arms wide and grinned as if showing a piece of art he created.

"Why, I only saved her lifeâ€¦.While you stood by and watched," he sneered. John frowned; he didn't expect to see Charles again. He didn't believe that he had just saved the Lieutenant. And most of all, it pissed him off how he, himself, knew that what he was saying was so damn true, his fists balled into a vice grip.

Charles smiled at the scene before him; so everything was working perfectly. "Let's not just sit here though; you do need to pull it. I'll do what I can to ease the pain, butâ€¦" He simply shrugged it offâ€¦as if it didn't particularly matter if she was hurt or not.

The Spartan nodded and looked down at the Lieutenant. He shut his eyes once and reopened them. He had to do it even though he knew it would hurt like a bitch. Gingerly, he wrapped his right hand around the needle and placed his left on her helmet. Charles shimmered and disappeared once more. Somewhere in the distance he could hear Cortana say something, but his mind was elsewhere. John searched the helmetâ€¦searched for some signâ€¦and when he received no indication or movement he tightened his grip on the needle and pulled.

The scream wasn't what shocked him. It was the solid fist of guilt that formed in his stomach that made the Spartan cringe away from her. It was the fear that he put her into painâ€¦It was the image of her bleeding face that put emotion into something that he didn't feel was human anymore.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:\*\* Le gasps!\_ â€¦Guysâ€¦the Lieutenant might die. D: NO, NO, JK. DUN HURT MEH. PLEASE? Oh, I owe an explanation, don't I? Umâ€¦well you see, my mom was pregnant and she has had a miscarriage before, so my entire family was just fucking crazy with worry. Plus, in the middle of the pregnancy she got gestational diabetes (we have genes for diabetes), which had the potential of harming or killing the baby. Which scared the fuck out of us even more. Sucks donkey balls, right?

WELL. I AM PROUD TO SAY THAT MY 3RD SISTER (NO, I WILL NOT REVEAL LAST NAMES. DUN WANTS ANY STALKERS. SORRY YA'LL.) BLAKE AVERY-ROWAN WAS BORN TWO DAYS ON A MOTHERFUCKNG FRIDAY. TAKE THAT, NATURE. WE FUCKING ROCK.

But I seriously apologize for keeping you guys waiting. I know that some of you were really looking forward to the next chapter. WELL, HERE IT IS. ABOVE THIS SHITTY AUTHOR'S NOTE. Anywho, I have to start updating every two weeks instead of one because of school and baby helping :3 Thank you to all the new people who have been favoriting and watching; it brings caterpillars to my stomach \*TROLLOLO FACE\*

This entire chapter was about 12,000 words by the way . \_

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â€|.UNTIL NEXT TIME. MYâ€|FRIENDSâ€|.FRIENDS? YEAH LET'S GO WITH FRIENDS. MY BESTEST FRIENDSâ€|THAT WAS A LITTLE CREEPYâ€|HOW ABOUT SEXY FRIENDS? â€|I'LL COME UP WITH SOMETHINGâ€|SOONâ€|

-LadyDynamite312

## 7. Beach Head

- \_To myself I am only a child playing on the beach, while vast oceans of truth lie undiscovered before me.\_ â€"Sir Isaac Newton

Rdvas R'Lamee snarled and turned sharply, back-handing the creature nearest to himâ€"whom just happened to be a defenseless grunt. The sound of padding feet did nothing to ease his tensed and frustrated demeanor and he knew then that he needed to get out. He didn't know where and he sure as hell didn't know why, but \_by the Prophets\_, if he didn't leave the cruiser at once he was going to ruthlessly murder every Covenant soldier that was left. In record time he was on the other side of the ship (weapons and vehicle fuel in tow). The next debriefing was with Fleet Commander Vadamee and Rdvas growled at the thought of finally feeling the human blood he longed for so many years to spill into his waiting palms. But he lost his chance; he tried to do what any other honorable soldier of the Prophets expected him too. He aimed his needle rifle and fired.

There was something there thoughâ€|A taste that caused his mandibles to twitch and his usually steely stance to become vacillating. This demon, this \_Yassa\_â€"as a human male with slanted eyes called her during one of his interrogationsâ€"laid unseen eyes upon him. It came as a disappointing shock that she had not burst into flames on the walkway. What had happened only thirty minutes prior flashed before his eyes one time too many. She also had a rifle and just as she turned it, he faltered, choked on his own merciless determination and shot her without thinking. No. That was not completely authentic. He had some control of his conscious in the adrenaline scorching moment. The first thing that entered his mind made Rdvas hunch his shoulders closer to his body, mandibles scrawling against his face as they enclosed tightly over his subtly curved jaw.

The hatchets on either side of the Phantom closed and a melodic hum produced its way from the cabin. So, Vrlan \_did\_ make the adjustments he assigned. Perhaps if he were clear-headed, he would have gone to give a strict and formal apology on his part. But he couldn't; it was virtually impossible to think the way an elite \_should\_ as voices filled his head, clouded his judgment, his belief.

They all whispered the same word. A calm, mitigate of a sea of voices all murmured one word:

"\*\*\_Kaidon\_\*\*."

The elite captain felt no need to repress the snarl of great respect that escaped tightly enclosed mandibles. Yes, this Yassa was the \_true\_ leader.

He would find Kaidon Yassa and it would be her blood splattered across his bladeâ€”no others.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em><strong>â€¦don't know if she's going to make itâ€¦<strong>\_"

"\_\*\*GOD DAMN. Look at that eye!\*\*\_"

"\_\*\*...Hawk? Hartmann, was it? I need you both to do what you can to help the Lieutenant. Understood?\*\*\_"

"\_\*\*Yes sir!\*\*\_" "\_\*\*Yes sir!\*\*\_"

. . .

"\_\*\*Chiefâ€¦I'm not sureâ€¦\*\*\_"

"\_\*\*She'll make itâ€¦she has to.\*\*\_"

. . .

She drifted in between sleep and reality. Eventually she couldn't decide which soothed her more. Every now and then she could hear voices, feel the familiar warm touch of hands, and every now and then there was the poking and prodding of her face. That was the worst of it, even though no pain had been inflicted upon her, she didn't like it that her face was exposed. Well, her whole body. The armor kept her warm, kept her limbs together. Howeverâ€¦

Another sensation was felt, this time it went over her body, leaving her head alone. The material laid over was cottony, almost flowing. \_A sheet?\_ Her fingers twitched as she felt the faint vibrations of footsteps leave her. \_Waitâ€¦\_ The footsteps halted and it took her a moment to register that she had actually spoken. Faint vibrations carried back over to her. There was a moment where she stirred and fought with her body to open her eyes, but \_something\_ kept her from doing so. Clearing her throat, she winced at the sudden ache in her esophagus.

"I, uh, I can't see you. I'm sorry. I know that seems pathetic, butâ€¦"

Another brief pause; silence was becoming a bitter burden to her oh-so quickly. She could hear the soft \_whoosh\_ of someone settling onto the floorâ€¦or a chair? The drugs injected into her swirled and danced like smoke made from a fire in her veins. \_Maybe I should ask for moreâ€¦\_ A secluded part of her brain took over from that point and tried to work with whatever sane part of her was left.

"You're probably wondering how I got myself into this situation, huh? Or do you already know?" She licked her dry lips and continued. "There was an elite, field commander maybe, with his rifle trained on him. I let him into the ship first and, uhâ€¦Well, I guess I put myself into the position of human shield." There wasn't any sound of movement and the breathing patterns of her 'guest' remained the same. \_That's alright, I can talk all day.\_

"I'm going to guess that you want to know why, eh?" She didn't wait for an answer, didn't pause in her rhythm of speech. The ache in the back of her throat increased, but she pushed it down, ignoring it and focused on her goal. "I justâ€¦it's not easy to stand by and watch your teammate die, you know? You try to do everything in your power to stop it from happening, but in the end, somewhere in your head, you know that there's no possible way you can save everyone. Maybe I'm just bad luck." Suddenly she chuckled as the smoke danced in her tunnels of blood once more.

"Or, perhaps, maybe I'm talking too much for your liking. I'm sorry about that. I'll try not to do it, but it's justâ€¦too cold in here. It's too empty. And I can't see."

>She could feel the weight of a heavy hand on her shoulder and she nodded once, as if someone had finally retaliated about her comments. "Thank youâ€¦for listening to me." There was a warm abyss that gave her the nagging thought she had experienced it formerly, but it gripped her consciousness like it was gripping to a life line. And slowly, gently, oh-so carefully, she fell into that same slumber.<p>

Valor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. This wasn't happening for the first time. The drugs were working as they were designed too, which meant that everything she said to him in their past conversations would not be remembered. Not that she needed to, anyway. He held onto each and every little word like a drop of his own blood. Henna eyes regarded the now still body, searching for any signs of consciousness. Only a tender mumble broke from the Lieutenant's lips and Valor stored the name away to search later. It was a planet, he realized, and assumed that it was her planet. Slowly he walked to the door eyes cast downward as he ran into the bulking mass of man in front of him.

"Sorry," he mumbled none too kindly, as his focused his gaze upward. At once he snapped a salute at the male. "Master Chief, sir! I didn'tâ€¦I was justâ€¦" Valor took a glance back at the unconscious woman and sighed, hazel eyes losing its feral shimmer.

Chief nodded and moved his gaze to his teammate as well. "I understand your concern for the Lieutenant. However, Medic Hartmann ordered that you were not to stand until the scar along you back grew another layer of skin." The Spartan raised an eyebrow and looked down at Nick in an unspoken question. The Helljumper grinned, yet it didn't meet his monotonous eyes. The few wrinkles along his forehead increased and his lips were pale, split and dry with blood. He almost looksâ€¦dead. John concluded. As he looked closely, he could spot a single silver hair in his thin beard.

Valor cleared his throat and nodded. "Yes sirâ€¦that he did. I came here to check on the Lieutenant, though. Iâ€¦I was worried." His eyes widened as he registered the words that left his pale lips and shook his hands frantically as if to ward off a bear. "I mean, I know she's strong; no doubt about it! It's just that she's done a lot for us little guys in this past weekâ€¦as well you sir. You both have earned our undying respect. Weâ€¦we would really hate it if she just died on us." He turned his back to the Chief, facing his companion. "You won't die on us," he swore under his breath.

There was a long moment of silence, void of any breathing or speaking between the two men. Finally, the Chief set a hand on Valor's

shoulder. "You should probably get some rations. Who knows when it will be before the next time we eat?" The other man reluctantly gave a sharp nod and brushed past the Spartan, marching down the hall.

He stared after him for a moment before stepping into the room. Minute dots of stale blood marked the floor in sloppy patterns; tired eyes narrowed as he moved closer to his destination. The Lieutenant was breathing evenly before he walked inside the room, but he could tell by the pace of her breaths that something wasn't right. Chief smirked as he tilted his head and examined her. Without warning, her hand shot out and caught his wrist to which his only response was a raised eyebrow.

"You're awake," a blunt statement whispered in such a soft, yet gruff voice, she would have thought he was murmuring a bitter prayer were it not for the enhanced hearing. "You're here," a blunt response that seemed to pull the small smirk into a full smile, the woman's voice wavered only slightly and he felt a small stab of pride in her strength. He settled with just leaning against the bed as he watched her expression contort into a menacing frown and ease into the blank mask she wore at the moment of his arrival.

He glanced back towards the door. "You just missed him," Chief said and crossed his arms over his chest. The smile was gone now; all that was left were lines edged into rough appearing skin from experience in battle.

"Yeahâ€¦I woke up just in time to hear him leaveâ€¦" She tried to sit up, but when a large hand gently pushed her back down, the menacing frown returned. "I'mâ€¦sore, Chief."

"You think that I'm going to fall for that one?" He shook his head, amusement swirling over his face. There was a slow shrug in response and he snorted through his nose. "I'm not; I've used that excuse before." John paused, a scowl of deep thought replacing amusement. He pondered for a moment if he should say what he wanted to at that single scene in timeâ€¦

"Live to fight another day, Lieutenant."

. . .

\_Chief Mendez frowned, showing none of the deep sympathy that gave his heart a deep ache he would never admit to. The girl before him watched him speak with terse eyes, sienna skin bearing fresh cuts. Clouded cyan eyes flickering ever so slightly; watching deaths occur every few minutes there was silence. Theyâ€¦Ackerson forced these kids into this. With more than just slight disappointment, Mendez came to the realization that these children were not meant for war; these children were not Spartans. Not the ones that Halsey and himself raised. Kids! A bunch of fucking kids put through augmentation and shoved into battle suits to make a fool of themselves! Inwardly, the Chief sighed as he watched the girl's lids slide close and bow her head. He waited, following her movements with his eyes as she saluted.\_

\_"Sir, Iâ€¦" She paused, throat suddenly parched. She cleared it again, cyan eyes becoming blazed with fury. "I won't forget them." Mendez raised his furry eyebrows in question. "Theyâ€¦all of them, sirâ€¦they can't have died in vain. I \_won't\_ allow it. I \_can't\_

allow it," she paused and finally avoided his gaze, her eyes settling onto the symbol for the UNSC. She turned back to her Chief and nodded sharply. "I'm fit to fight, Chief. Just say the word. I can go back out there. I'llâ€"\_"

\_"No."\_"

\_"â€|Sir?"\_"

\_"Listen, threeâ€"Listen LT. You see my face?" The girl allowed a cautious nod, clearly not understanding what point he was trying to make. "It's attached to my body, correct?" Again, her cautious nod of acknowledgement followed. "You know why?"\_"

\_"No, sir."\_"

\_"I lived to fight another day." He grimaced as her face contorted into several different emotions; there was a sense of familiarity thereâ€|\_"

\_"It's my fault this happened to themâ€|\_"

\_"You're not psychic, kid. You couldn't have predicted the damn outcomes of battle. No one can! Not until the very end when the numbers of men left on both sides are counted." Mendez snatched her slim wrist into his own meaty hand and held it up between their two bodies. He turned it so the palm was facing her. "Look at it."\_"

\_"She lookedâ€|and she smiled, only slightly. It was a scar that each and every Spartan III received. All who wore it were brethren. Adjustments, as sick as it may have sounded, were made to the scars. New ones added, accidental or not. Some turned the marred skin into symbols or pictures while others let them be; a reminder of whom they were before Ackerson, Mendez, and C.K. A reminder of what they currently were. It started off as a single, five centimeter wide, jagged line. Soon it was joined by another line, this one still recent, a gift from an elite with a pretty energy sword. The deformed 'x' shape was much like a memorial, a memory that would forever haunt her, wherever she went. It seared as she continued to stare at it and Mendez moved his own hand away, letting go of her wrist."\_"

\_"Chief Mendez?"\_"

\_"Lieutenant."\_"

\_"I'll live today, sir." The hand fell to her side, a grin tugging at tender lips not yet touched by battle or war. Cyan eyes flickered and this time, Mendez noted in astonishment, he could see the same look one-seventeen gave him. \_How stubborn could these kids get?\_ He wondered. Only a sharp nod was acknowledgement."\_"

\_"Dismissed," he said, and turned to exit the room."\_"

\_"Her voice called out to him; said voice in such a tone that he would often dream of it from that moment on."\_"

\_"\*\*I'll live today sir, but I'm gonna carry their weight!\*\*"\_"

\_"Chief Franklin Mendez let a bark of laughter escape him. He



continued down the hall. He never did turn back that day because he knew that there were two benevolent kids out there that could pull off what was impossible for others. One-seventeen and three-twelve, only two words could describe them both;\_

\*\*\_Stubborn, bratsâ€|\_\*\*

. . .

The Lieutenant shot upwards like lightning across a stormy night. Her spine was unnaturally straight for several moments before she slumped and buried her face in her hands. The bandages over her left eye made her frown. "The hellâ€|" She muttered menacingly as she pulled and tugged at the gauze. Chief watched her, reminding him of a dog fighting with a leash that kept it bound to a tree. Before he knew it, one strip fell to the ground. He gripped her wrists and effectively restrained her from preceding more hell on the careful work of Hawk and Hartmann.

Chief frowned and she struggled just barely. "Stop, you need to keep these on until you healâ€""

"I'm fine," she snapped and pulled back with a force that almost snapped her wrists. She grunted past the strain as he refused to let go. He watched her with a doleful expression. The Lieutenant sighed softly, a whimper escaping her. "Pleaseâ€|" The only eye showing was still closed; he noticed and tilted his head loosening his grip. Gently, cautiously, she let her hands fall to her lap.

Charles shimmered and appeared beside her on the table. Chief frowned as he caught sight of the AI, but said nothing as it was more focused on the Lieutenant. "I see you're awake," Charles remarked. The Lieutenant pursed her lips, brows furrowing. She turned her head in his general direction. Charles shimmered and crossed his arms. "Tearing away at my masterpiece, hm?"

The Spartan III huffed and nodded, patiently waiting. "Analyzing," the AI announced. After a moment he squinted off into a certain corner of the room, seeming to come across something that didn't exactly appeal to him. "Remove them." He concluded; she didn't need to be told twice. Immediately her fingers tugged at the gauze once more, not bothering to use any cautious or tedious handling. Large hands were placed over hers, this time pulling them back to remove the gauze themselves. She could only sit as layer by layer were peeled away in a torturously slow pace. Frigid air ran across her face causing her body to convulse at the sudden contact of the chill. Charles watched, eyebrows raised as she kept her eyes closed. With a sigh, the AI pulled a cigar from his jacket, lit it with a snap of his fingers, and stuck it between his lips without uttering a single word.

Encryption in the form of a smoke cloud left his synthetic lips: "Alright, open them."

"I can't."

"Well," he replied with ease. "If you want to remain a liability for the remainder of your lifeâ€|"

A curse or two was directed at Charles. Slowly she opened her eyes

and jerked backwards as she adjusted to the light, the unnatural red hue that seemed to dance at the edge of her vision. "Chief," she whispered and sneered as numbers ran over his form when she took in the sight of his body. Height, weight, heartbeat, even \_age\_ appeared before her. Waking up to find yourself enhanced-'improved' in unnatural ways according to the law of human physics sprang forth horrific memories of her first moments after she woke from her augmentation at ONI. \_What the hell did they do to meâ€|?\_ The Chief could only watch as the eye focused on him; cyan blazed true near her ebony iris with vines of fire brick curled at the edges. It took him a moment to find words of reassurance that he still could not force out of his mouth. Nervous eyes flickered away, towards the ground to hide her vulnerability; this would be his greatest regret.

Charles took a few steps forward, cigar trapped between two scarred fingers. The Lieutenant looked up at him, hesitant and unsure. The A.I. simply rolled his eyes and placed the cigar in his mouth, inhaling in the same moment. "There's no point in hiding from me," he muttered.

>She offered a single, minute smile. "Explain the dynamics to me later, alright?"<p>

"I suppose," he shrugged. He pointed towards the storage unit behind him. "Mind carrying me out?"

Just as the Chief was about to protest, Charles fixed him with a steely gaze that made him rein in anything he would have wanted to say. Without another backwards glance to her teammate, the Lieutenant slid off of the 'infirmary table', effectively knocking the blanket to the ground. The storage unit slid into the palm of her hand, secured as she wrapped her slim fingers around it. The female pulled both IVs from her arm and strolled out of the room, numbers being thrown at her from every surface.

John resisted sighing; he felt a bit guilty, felt like this was his fault. He would have voiced his concerns, he would have apologized butâ€|The way her eyes went downcast and how her sienna skin became a shade lighter; hesitation was something that he hated with a fiery passion, something that he could not stand, like \_all\_ Spartans. He lifted his arms, studying the faint trail of lines on them before letting them fall to his side as he exited the room and went to find his own armor. Charles had received useful information about Covenant weapons cache a few clicks up-spin from their current location when he integrated with the battle cruiser. \_I should get\_ \_prepped\_, he internally sighed, feeling the outcome of not sleeping at all the previous night burden him. It was his priority, or so he thought, to keep an eye on the Lieutenant.

Eventually, and abruptly, the Spartan II would be proven wrong.

\* \* \*

><p>Jacob Keyes studied the view out of the window, hands dug deep inside his pockets. The recent chat with Silva left him annoyed and feeling much older than he actually was. His storm-blue eyes shifted, trailing along the sill of the observation window and rested on a person in ebony armor. LT stood at attention, confidence and security surging through her now that she was whole once again in her suspiciously clean suit (the tangerine streaks nowhere to be seen). She eyed the captain with what she hoped came across as vague

interest. Keyes nodded once, a sharp movement, as his attention was directed to the window again. "At ease, Lieutenant. Is there anything that you needed?"<p>

Moving closer to stand next to her Captain, the Spartan observed him from peripheral vision. His skin was pale and flushed just a bit, the barely visible color of rose making him appear almost flustered. \_Silva was here not too long ago.\_ The Lieutenant remained silent for several heartbeats. After concluding that Keyes was in a condition that she found suitable, she joined her hands behind her back, straightening her posture. "Sir," she began, voice devoid of any emotion. "How are you feeling?"

Keyes narrowed his eyes; the tone she spoke in would have convinced any other person that she couldn't give a damn about how anyone was feeling, let alone himself. However, because of his encounters with the Master Chief and other Spartans, he did not take offense knowing that it was only natural for her to act this way. Simply shrugging the Captain turned his head to look at the soldier. "Better than what I felt inside of that ship, Lieutenant." He paused, head swiveling back to the window once more. "Although, I believe I should be the one asking that question... I want an honest answer," his entire body now faced her, mirroring her stance. "How are you feeling?"

The answer was automatic and only partially true: "Green, sir. I'm ready to go when and if you need me." Jacob sighed heavily, one steady hand combing through slick, silver-slate grey hair.

"Lieutenant, if you're not up to full speed, I understand. You can stay here at base until-"

"Sir, please!" Jacob's eyes went wide in shock. His head snapped up to watch the Lieutenant as her shoulders hunched forward, military stance long forgotten. "I can't just sit here, Captain. Not when we need every soldier possible out and on the field fighting so we can get off of...this." Her hand gestured to the plains that filled the glass before them causing Keyes to turn and look. She had a point. They didn't know what this 'Halo' did, the ring-world they currently were residing on, but it was some variation of a weapon that the Covenant wanted their claws on; reason enough that the humans should find the trigger. Coming to a decision, Captain Keyes kept his eyes focused on the plains ahead.

"I won't stop you; not that I actually could to begin with," came his gruff, yet concerned tone. "If you feel like you're able to fight, then fight." A pause of silence followed and his voice grew a harsh layer, as if he were speaking to a child caught with their hands in a cookie jar. "However, if you put more strain on than you can carry, I'll put you on mop duty for the next ten years. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Her hand snapped into a salute. Keyes nodded in dismissal. "Captain Keyes?" For the second time that day, she surprised him. An emotionless mask was directed her way. "Thank you...for...your concern, sir." And then she was gone, already down the hallway and around the corner as if she never had a conversation with him in the first place.

Jacob Keyes chewed on the actions of the Lieutenant long after she left; everything that she did was automatic and to the point, no

pause in between. But when the Spartan thanked him a pieceâ€”a broken, neglected pieceâ€”of a shivering child appeared. Was it out of his nature to pick up on these things? Not with anyone else, no. But this was a Spartan...

He smiled, moving to fold his hands behind his back and straighten his posture, wisdom colored eyes tracing the contours of the rock and mountain that seemed to stretch into eternity.

"You're welcome."

\* \* \*

><p>"Charles."<p>

"What?"

"Any suggestions?"

"For \_what\_?"

"Weaponsâ€”|"

"Charles?"

"Kid, if you call my name one more timeâ€”|"

"I wouldn't if you justâ€”"

"Oh for \_fuck's sake\_, take the SRS99C-S2 and the M7 SMG."

Hands raked through containers for ammo and weapons. "Two or one?"

"Four."

"â€”|I'm seriousâ€”|"

"And I'm not?"

The Lieutenant smirked, her head bowed as she searched through the containers, her fingers moving aside what she didn't want. After twenty minutes or so she stood with a trio of belts wrapped around her torso, dual M7s attached to each seal on her thighs and the S2 sniper rifle snug in the slot on her back. One belt contained ammo, the other sporting fragmentation grenades. For a Greenhorn, it would have taken someone that was built like a tank to carry all of that gear, but the LT could barely feel its weight through the suit.

The new mission was simple (or so it seemed); find Halo's control room. The Captain gave order for the Master Chief and Cortana to locate the Cartographer, extract Halo's control room location, and head there. The Lieutenant and Charles were told to take a pelican to another location where the Covenant has been snooping according to the three AIs. A small team was awarded to her for this operation. She remembered the conversation vividly and how she came to the decision to go in alone. After some consideration -and input from Charles-, she asked and received permission to only bring with her the pilot of the pelican. Turning sharp on her heels, LT was a bit astonished at the sight of Nick Valor standing in the doorway with a

gape painting his features. Blinking several times Valor cleared his throat and approached the Spartan stopping just a foot away from her. They were both roughly the same height (the Lieutenant taller with her armor on by centimeters) so it wasn't hard for him to face her. His eyes scanned the helmet for a sign. Eventually he awarded the woman with a boorish grin and in response she held out her hand. Valor felt his dry lips tighten as he accepted the shake, but pulled her into a hug instead. It hurt, with the square edges of the suit poking and prodding him through his own.

"Missed ya'," he drawled sarcastically, a dreamy smile on hidden behind the furry pelt.

"I was out for nine hours."

"Felt like nine \_years\_."

She pulled back and kept her gaze on a particular scorched part of his Helljumper get-up from the elite on the \_Truth and Reconciliation\_. "I'm in the middle of prepping for the next mission right now, so excuse me if I seem distant."

"Anywhere ya' go Lupo, I'll follow. 'Sides, I can't wait to hit that beach! White sand, rolling wavesâ€œ"

Ignoring his comment, she continued without skipping a beat. "I'm afraid I won't be accompanying you to find the Cartographer. Speaking of which, you need to grab your gear. Drop-ships leave in fifteen and you have no weapons on your person. Get to it now, Gunnery Valor. Am I understood?"

He saluted, a melancholy expression creating a dark shadow over his face. "Yes ma'am!"

She sent him off with a nod. A thin thread of uneasiness crept along her spine, yet she was able to keep herself from shuddering. \_That embrace just now...what the hell was that? And why...did I allow it? I don't have time for this; I need to focus on the weapons cache.\_ As if on cue, a murmured voice resonated throughout her helmet.

"Can't let yourself have a life, can you?"

"Charles," the Lieutenant spoke his name on a heavy sigh.

The AI bristled at her exhausted tone, but did not let this become a display in his voice. "In time, you'll see. Even if I have to teach you myself."

"Teach me what?" The agitation was thicker than blood.

"...In time," he snarled. "Learn some damn patience, \_ma'am\_."

"Let's get to 718-C, okay?" A low searing began in the back of her head which she took as cue to leave.

Inside the compartment of the Mark V helmet, Charles drowned in his own loathing. He needed to teach her just what it meant to be human because no one knew that better than himself. That was what his original problems were with Spartans; they're inability to convey

emotion. So, deeming them hopeless, he did the only thing he could; their lives were ended. But the Lieutenant produced a certain aura that gave him a bit of hope. As well as the Master Chief.

The synthetic male glanced around the matrix of glimmering numbers scrolling from up to down and down to up. Depression caused the image of him to shimmer and break apart for a moment. Charles stirred and came together once again. There wasn't much time.\_ When has there ever been?\_

\_\*\*When has there ever beenâ€|?\*\_

Six came to a stop, exhaling with a heavy shudder that made her head turn involuntarily. "Charlesâ€"

"Lieutenant, ma'am!" The image of a young boyâ€"no older than nineteen, she supposedâ€"sprinted towards her at an impressive speed for someone who wasn't enhanced with drugs. The boy smirked, his obnoxious aura seeming to have a scent to itâ€| Or maybe that was just the overuse of cologne. The buzz cut suited him well, highlighting his plain, pouty features. "I'm Chris!" A hand was held out to her. Without skipping a beat she gripped it and shook. Someone else already had a prepared response.

"Full name and rank," the AI used her outer speakers. \_Of course\_, she thought with an annoyed roll of her eyes.

Chris swallowed the blob of tension in his throat, nodding as he moved into a crisp military stance. "Yes sir! Flight Lieutenant Christopher Arnold, sir!"

Charles was satisfied with that, seeing as he did not saying anything else. The Lieutenant returned the salute. Her eyes moved to the pelican. \*\*\_Pelican 718-C, UNSC. First issued into battle in 2532. Flown by Flight Lieutenant Arnold, Christopher Benjamin.\_\*\* Well, at least she knew he wasn't lying.

"Flight Lieutenant Christopher Arnold," Charles' voice set the room ablaze. "We're going to need something shorter."

The boy nodded and placed a finger to his chin as he mulled over the order. "Mm, rightâ€|Shorterâ€|.shorterâ€|Oh!" Suddenly he snapped his fingers and his porcelain skin glowed. "Raptor; it's a name I'm fond of."

The AI smiled and nodded but his voice was the howling wind in the dead of the night. "If that's the best your imagination can do for you, then I actually fear of your flying capabilities."

Raptor blinked before giving in to defeat with a heavy sigh. "Imagination isn't on my asset list. Sorry." The Lieutenant could tell by his tone of voice that the boy was anything but. His eyes shined as he grinned at her. "Are you ready to depart, ma'am?" Her terse nod was the only signal he needed to jump inside his bird and start the engines. The Spartan's movements were slow as she stepped onto the back hatchet. In her peripheral vision she caught sight of drab green. \*\*\_Master Chief Petty Officer; John-117. UNSC, special forces.\_\*\*

He was staring at her, watching her leave. There was no remorse, no

farewells because even though they had the time, he was absolutely sure neither knew how. The figure clad in ebony paused momentarily only to resume and step onto the ship. The hatchet closed and the pelican ascended into the sky of blue streaked with round shapes of ivory.

"Chief, our ride is ready for us." John watched the pelican leave. Cortana waited for him to do the same. Which he did. Because he was supposed to; it was a soldier's duty to do as told.

\* \* \*

><p>The ivory flurries caressing the glass of the pelican's shield made the Lieutenant appreciate the sudden shift in climate change. All of her attention was dragged to Charles as he <em>humph<em>ed and \_hummm\_ed the entire ride. "Something wrong?" His silver eyes fixed her with a glare that not only would have killed, but sent a poor soul straight into Hell's rectum.

"It's snowing."

"It takes you two hours to analyze \_that\_?" Raptor snorted.

But the holographic man on the pedestal rolled his eyes as one hand moved, gesturing to the scene before them. "It's snowing \_here\_," he tried to clarify. When the boy only shrugged, Charles growled. He caught the bridge of his nose between his index and middle finger with a heavy sigh.

"Cortana, Wesley, and I have been analyzing this ring for quite some time now. We had predicted that the weather pattern would be continuous around the entire structure, since it is not a natural formation," he paused to shake his head and glance at the snow. "So yes, it is unexpected when you have weather patterns on an artificial world."

All fell quiet as that bit of information was mulled over for a while. The Lieutenant looked down at Charles from the co-pilot's seat above Raptor. "Maybe we should fill everyone in on the new info?"

The AI shrugged casually. "Honestly, it's up to you. I don't think it's worth risking our position though."

"Right," she murmured. Charles insisted on providing them cover with a new file prototype he had been using. She was cautious at first, but then let him integrate with the ship's systems. The prototype let the pelican remain unseen and lower heat signatures on it. After ten minutes of Raptor hyperventilating about 'what it would do to his baby', the Lieutenant asked the AI if he was entirely sure that it wouldn't kill them or if Phantoms would randomly start shooting at them.

"It works for five hours at a time," he had said.

"Which is why it's a prototype," she concluded to which the synthetic snorted and gave a single nod. It was proving to be rather useful as they continued to their destination. Only twice had Charles tracked enemy ships on the radar. But as soon as they appeared, the red triangle floated off of the screen into hunter green oblivion.

"How far off are we now, Charles?" There was a long lapse of silence.

"We're here, but there's nowhere for the pelican to land without being spotted. You'll have to jump." The Lieutenant spoke recognition to the plan. After pressing a few buttons on her screen, she stepped down from the co-pilot's seat and sauntered through the door leading to the back of the ship. Charles focused on Raptor with a calm look.

"If any transmissions come in, ship them to my channel so the pelican will not be detected," he shimmered out of vision before reappearing in milliseconds. "Just so you know, \_Omega\_ is Spartan-117 with Cortana; \_Alpha\_ is the Lieutenant with me. Too complicated?"

Raptor chuckled and shook his head. "I think I can handle it, for the most part."

"Glad to hear it. Shut the hatch behind us. I want it sealed and bolted."

"Yes, sir!" The young boy exclaimed. A large smile was on his face as the Lieutenant reappeared inside the cockpit. "Hatch is clear to open, ma'am. Whenever you're ready." The Spartan pulled the storage compartment from the terminal and slid it into the slot on the back of her helmet. It was blazing hot in the back of her head, followed by a slight chill.

She moved to the door, hands bracing each side of it. "Do it."

"Copy that," Raptor replied, one gloved finger hitting a button on his terminal. \_Alpha\_ bolted forward, putting all of her strength into sprinting. Within four strides she was at the end of the ship. No hesitation was present as she jumped out and spun exactly one hundred eighty degrees mid-air.

Raptor immediately pushed the thrusters on the pelican, engines hitting critical. He finally cut them down to 'drift' to preserve what little fuel was left. The boy switched his screen to show the available UNSC channels, accessing the one encrypted with what was called 'AI lace'. A burst of static deafened him momentarily causing him to rip the earpiece off in a haste to get away from the screeching. One, drowned voice called out to him. The earpiece was gingerly replaced into his ear as he spoke.

"Alpha, come in, Alpha! Do you read me?"

Charles seized that opportunity to speak like children seized sugary items. "I read you, Spotlight. The Lieutenant is reacquainting herself with her surroundings. Should take thirty seconds, tops." The young flight lieutenant released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Copy that, Alpha. Spotlight out."

\* \* \*

><p>Sand. Dry, rough, unforgiving sand. The Chief took in the approaching land zone with an annoyed expression. The task of finding



the Cartographer was left to himâ€”of courseâ€”while the Lieutenant headed off in a one-man team hunt for one of two Covenant weapons caches. He didn't like the idea of her heading off on her own; although in its raw stages, their teamwork gave a high chance of success. Now, though, as John sat in the seat directly next to the door, he wondered where she was from. It wasn't urging him to the point to ask Cortana, so he remained quiet as he watched waves tumble in the water.

"Something on your mind, Chief?"

He checked over his rifle for the second time as he casually swiveled his head to peer around the hull of the pelican. "I'm fine. Has there been any word from the two teams yet?"

Cortana held a brief silence. Using the COMM channels had its pro's and con's. "No word on their whereabouts. But Spotlightâ€”718 reported in just thirty minutes before about Alpha's decent."  
"

"Alright; alert of me any messages that come through from Beta or Alpha."

"Understood, Chief. Be warned, I may get quiet since I'm covering two channels."

At that, John could only respond with a seemingly diverted grunt.

Foehammer clicked the overhead in the hull. A feeling of buzzed anxiety trickled in the back of her skull which she assumed was coming from the marines sitting in the back. Now wasn't the time to get cocky. "Cortana, ma'am, do you mind giving us another once over on the mission?"

"Already forgotten Foehammer? I didn't think the air pressure change would actually put a deficiency on your attention span."

All the marines laughed, Foehammer joining in. "Ah, there isn't anything wrong with looking over the 'to-do' list, is there?" Cortana chuckled at this.

"The Covenant believe that what they call the '\_Silent Cartographer\_' is somewhere under this island. The Cartographer is a map room that will lead us to Halo's control center. The island has multiple structures and installations. One of them contains the map room."

On time, the pelican's engines were pushed barely (something only the Chief could feel).

"We're approaching LZ and it's gonna' be hot!" The ship spun so quickly, most hit the sides of the pelican with loud huffs as they managed to grip the bars. "Touchdown! \_Hit it, marines!\_"

Staff Sergeant Stacker pointed straight at an elite roaring towards them, snarling into the air tasting of led; "Pile out people, let's move!"

Sand flew about as the Helljumper assault led by the Spartan drove up the beach. All of the excitement seemed to dissipate as the battle

raged on. Cries of pain—or perhaps laughter—strangled the distant vibrations of gurgling waves lapping at boulders stained in aged moss.

John slid in close behind one of the open crates with an MA5B pressed close to his chest. A plasma bolt sizzled as it flew past the right side of the crate. It dispersed when it only hit the sand. He moved from cover then, jerking his body around the cover and letting loose five bullets into the grunt who shot the bolt. Another soldier scoffed at the Spartan, flashing an amused grin.

"Nice one, Chief," Valor growled.

"I try."

Valor laughed, dodging a grenade in just milliseconds. For just moments the sound of bullets ceased. Even the brief silence couldn't keep a lid on Nick's excitement; he pulled a grenade, shouting "\_Al cielo\_" and pitched it into the waiting jaws of an elite. Portions of warm flesh streaked the sky with vital fluid trailing behind. Pieces landed in the sand while few others fell onto innocent bystanders. \_Thump!\_ A chasmal hole remained in place of the creature's head. Its body fell to the ground as Byzantium fluid trickled into the ground out minerals below.

John took this opportunity to eliminate the grunts nearest to his figure. Following his lead, Valor lifted his shotgun and pumped two rounds into a jackal. Another fell as he hopped over his recent kill and mowed through enemy forces. The Chief exhaled softly as he reloaded his pistol. Growling merely yards ahead of him snatched his attention.

"Warrant Valor—"

"I see him, Chief."

Two shots echoed into the air tinged with salt and blood and glory. One grunt slumped against an unopened crate as it purled blood caught in its minute esophagus. Each marine trotted along the area. With the area thoroughly checked Cortana called in Foehammer.

"\_Area is secured, Foehammer. You're clear for landing.\_"

"\_Affirmative! Echo, four-nineteen inbound. Did somebody order a warthog?\_"

An exhausted Helljumper let his head lull to one shoulder with his mouth agape in relief. "Music to my ears, Foehammer."

She chuckled as she brought her bird in close. "\_You our know motto:\_ we deliver!"

Catcalls and whistles danced across the beach. The marine who had spoken felt torpidity go to his cheeks and let loose a nervous chuckle.

"Yeah, I bet you do..." He muttered, kicking at the sand with an absent mind.

Warthog released and pelican leaving the landing zone, the Chief picked out two ODSs to tag along with him. Warrant Officer Valor and Sergeant Stacker volunteered without clamor as the Warrant settled into the passenger seat and Stacker clasped the turret. John clambered in the driver's seat.

Stacker glanced at the other marines. Honestly, are they just going to sit there? "\_Hey!\_ Knuckleheads!" Each male turned with a firm glare. "Don't leave your asses hanging like that! Set up a defensive perimeter, grab ammo and weapons...hell, dig in your asses! \_Anything\_!"

"Ay, ay sergeant!" They set to digging out a trench in the terrain.

Stacker uttered some sort of impute noise. The jumper took the turret with renewed frenzy. "Alright, boys, let's rock and roll!"

Scenery; the general appearance of a place; the aggregate of features that give character to a landscape.

Beauty; the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations, a meaningful design or pattern, or something else.

Despite the rather in-depth definition of each word, Cortana found that they did not fit the description of the island as well as she preferred it to. \_Allure\_ and \_pulchritude\_ might come close, but it didn't work. She needed another opinion. "Chief?"

"Yes?"

"Is this island beautiful?"

John's expression was one of rebuke at the sudden question. As he continued to ponder this, his eyes hovered over the callow foliage in clear curiosity. \_Wait, callow?\_ He nodded.

"Callow."

"Oh," Cortana smiled at his choice of vocabulary. "That wouldn't have anything to do with"

"Let's stay on track. We need to find that Cartographer."

"Of course." He could practically feel the laughter rolling off of her. "I marked the location on your HUD."

"Thanks."

It was quiet (well as quiet as things could become with Valor in the vehicle) when she spoke again. "She'll be fine."

He sighed, grip tightening on the wheel. "Yeah," he replied in a voice just too hoarse. "Yeah, I know."

And he started to believe himself until the fuel rod hit the 'Hog in close range. It went tumbling into the sky and off of the platform at full velocity. Landing in the gravel once more, John didn't

understand the vague sense of déjà-vu as he tumbled out of his seat.

"Ain't that a bitch?" Valor growled, spitting blood between arid lips. The Chief smiled grimly at his somewhat moving form.

"Status, Warrant?"

"Fine! I'm fine." Said Warrant gazed up at the structure they were blown off of. "\_OH\_, this fucker here..." He didn't spare the Spartan a second glance as he tossed over his rocket launcher. "Kick his ass. 'Cause I can'tâ€|You know, uh, I gotta stretch."

One-one-seven caught the M41, leveling it on his shoulder. Valor grunted in slight pain as he pulled himself behind the tipped 'Hog.

"Careful though, the girl's got a mean kickâ€even for a Spartan."

Chief leveled his gaze at the injured man. "What did you do?"

The Helljumper shrugged with a grin gracing his features. "Ah, added gunpowder. You should probably get into a defensive position before youâ€"

\_WHOOSH!\_

He sighed heavily, sparing a glance to the heavens.

"Fire."

\* \* \*

><p>There was some appeal to the art of stealth. At least, that was what Commander Kurt always preached to her. In just the span of minutes she had already passed by several forces, choosing to ignore them all. She had her orders. Even if they were orders issued to specifically her and she had to lie about, her duty was to follow the Captain. Not some gun-ho shock trooper. Not a Spartan commando whose purpose was to point and shoot like an automated turret. And especially not that damned A.I. who thought she was made of flesh because she was created from flesh. Bullshit. They were so naive to think that she was someone fighting for the weak that-<p>

An ear-splitting scream tore through her consistent train of thought, cleansing her mind of those \_disgusted\_ assumptions. The sound remained for exactly ten seconds and yet it's sheer volume and disturbing curl of the voice was enough to bring the Lieutenant to her knees with a barely suppressed groan.

"\_Charles\_," she hissed as she ground one row of teeth against the other.

"I think now would be a good time to discuss your state of health in \_all\_ aspects. Wouldn't you agree?"

Cautiously she swallowed a pool of saliva gathered on her tongue, then replied in a hoarse voice, "Listen. We have a job to do. I'm expected to complete the mission successfully without raising

suspicion. If you can't sit still for one damn minute-

"No. It's not me. And you know it."

"Oh really, now?" She didn't hide the sarcastic smirk clearing the pain from her face. "So it's me?"

"No."

"I don't have time for this," the Lieutenant hauled herself to her feet and continued her prow through the snow. If it hadn't been for Charles and his insistent prodding, her standard ebony armor would have been a deadly contrast to the snow that flurried around her being. She approached the edge of the cliff and spared a glance down.

"How far?"

"One point six-zero-nine-three-four kilometers."

"Great," she sighed, turning her head to the left.

"Oh wait," an orange marker appeared on her HUD, directed downwards and farther to the left. "Did you mean the landing pad there or the temple that \_oozes\_ the words, '\_home of the murdering religious\_'?" Another marker appeared just ahead.

With Charles adjusting the building before her, it took several moments to comprehend what her eyes openly gawked at. On cue, the flurries around the two cleared to properly reveal the silvered triangular prism that rose through the sky. Beams connected and intersected downward, caving in on the smooth frame of panels beneath. At best, the Lieutenant could describe it as an armor chest plate or headdress.

"'\_Murdering religious\_' is quite accurate."

"I have never experienced something like this. It's-

"Drawing you in?"

"Yeah." They stood together in silence, trying to find warmth in the power that reached and tugged at the edges of their existence. Everything within was being pulled forward to jump off the cliff, to run up the stairwell, to not look back and care. The feeling surging within them couldn't be described to a 'T', but Charles seemed positive to think the emotion happened to be fate that descended.

The Lieutenant gazed at the structure, eyes lingering along the largest beam; it grew from a pit in the snow (most likely running deeper than what it appeared to be) and transcended through to eloquently collide with beams and smooth panels. The patterning along the sides were familiar to the geometric designs on the outside of the ring before she had broken atmosphere after escaping the \_Pillar\_. Everything here breathed an eerie aura that tangled with death and an unforgivable decision.

Charles hummed with an intense energy causing the helmet's HUD to produce an unfocused image of cardinal. "This is it. \_This\_ is the

heart of Halo."

For a Spartan III, one that had not lived long enough to be a vice admiral that gave the yes or no to blow shit up, her response was unexpected: "We're storming it."

"So, you're going to jump off of a five mile cliff then?"

"Any other ideas?"

"Try not to kill us. I am worth something, you know."

"Of course," she sighed. "How much time before the Covenant discover it?"

"Closest troops are about two hours out. If you move now, we might have enough time to get through door locks and inside," Charles murmured, then raised his voice an octave. "We have our edge, Lieutenant. As long as we have this weapon, this defense against those bastards, we can win this war."

The Lieutenant couldn't possess the same amount of excitement, for they were not even sure of what kind of power Halo could produce. The damn thing was easily ten kilometers in diameter. Who knew what damage it could do; not only to ships, but planets as well. And yet...

"Think it comes with a manual, Charles?" She took ten steps backwards from the cliff then sprinted forward, covering ground in milliseconds and pushing off on the ledge with balls of her feet.

"Ever heard of the phrase, 'wing it'?"

She sneered in regret. "Glue horns to my hair, carve words into my back and call me demonic. I'm going to let you do it."

Sanity is something she cannot be bothered to maintain properly.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: Hope this chapter is worth something. I apologize for the long wait guys, I no longer have a computer anymore, so all of the files for HLV (including future chapters) are gone. No longer in existence. And it kills me. You don't even know. Anywho... until the next chapter!

## 8. Shafted

-\_The light you see at the end of a tunnel is the front of an oncoming train. -\_David Lee Roth

"A what?"

Captain R'Lamee stood rigid as Fleet Commander Vadamee circled him with something akin to a predatory challenge freely dancing within amber irises that threatened to swallow a pinpoint pupil whole. A sharp feeling of bitter curiosity tumbled off of Rdvas. He was interested in what the Fleet Commander wanted to do to him at that moment, no matter how malicious. Vadamee, currently, already dealt

with scrutiny not only from other Shipmasters within his fleet, but most importantly, from the holy Prophets. Humans were able to break through his defenses despite his best efforts and touch the purity of Halo with their deceptive footprints. This failure of completing to do his job most definitely would ensure his inability to go on the Great Journey. Irritation and a slice of dread seemed to be his ever constant expression. Rdvas knew to take caution for this particular meaning. Any more failures would result instant death.

"A kaidon, Fleet Commander" The commander paused in his circling to face one of his many captains head on. Rivas lifted his chin a fraction, letting his mandibles part in stubbornness. Body language usually reserved for younger children, it meant that he was sure of his words and would accept any challenge brought against them. Vadamee observed Rdvas with scrutiny.

"Continue."

Shoulders stretched behind him, Rdvas spoke with a steady voice of reasoning, "This female demon, Fleet Commander, is what I believe to be of some valued significance to the Heretics. Through my observations I have found that this demon possesses some variation of leadership. The Forerunners themselves have spoke of the word. Further interrogation of other humans support my theories, Fleet Commander."

Vadamee tilted his head away from the captain. He was so sure of this, that he would take any challenge that Vadamee could present. Such a thing wasn't unusual in general, but when dealing with humans it is. The Commander tilted his head back towards the one who stood accused. "You believe this demon to be a Kaidon. You have claimed that the gods, the Forerunners, spoke to your mind. Yet, you have let another demon tread God Halo again with his filthy footsteps. That aircraft should have been obliterated!"

"My Lekgolo troops--"

"Managed to disgrace our gods further with their failure." Vadamee growled, low and guttural, "And because of these failures, you will not walk the Great Journey." Rdvas' head jerked upwards in sharp fury, pupils narrowing to slits as he glared at the Kaidon before him.

"Speaking with such sureness, Fleet Commander?" Rdvas hissed. "Do not be so smug. You will stand along with me, as the Prophets and all of those worthy take to the Great Journey, to achieve all that is sacred and holy. Brothers always, are we not?"

An echoing snarl and the crack of sturdy connected with tender flesh. Rdvas choked, instantly hitting the floor. Mandibles quivered delicately, then parted to release several teeth. The captain held his mouth, the searing pain unbearable. Fleet Commander Vadamee towered about the gold armored elite, mandibles still outstretched from his cry of outrage. "The only reason you bear your head, Rdvas, is I, myself. Were it not for my interference, the Jiralhanae would gnaw on your bones." Rdvas shuddered; once, twice. Repressing his emotions pulled the searing into a full-blown fire.

"This council is not to discuss the festivities of our father and your near-death as result. I have been called here by you to review

the matters of this 'Kaidon Yassa' you spoke so surely of. Was I not?" Vadamee regained his composure as he regarded his half-brother, steadily inhaling and exhaling through his nostrils.

Rdvas, on his knees like a stumpy Kig'Yar, saluting his twenty years wiser brother. "You were, Shipmaster."

Thel scanned the male one last time. Offered his hand. Rdvas keened in apology, taking it at once. On his feet again, he attempted to close his mandibles to which Vadamee protested, "Suffer this. Otherwise, you will not learn your lesson." R'Lamee restrained sounds of distress, letting his mandibles loosely drift beside his jaw. Fresh blood oozed, gathered at the tips and splatter on indigo tile. Fleet Commander Thel'Vadamee merciless gazed his half-blood sibling in cobalt irises glimmering with a brooding emotion. Cobalt. '\_Like mother..\_'

Those thoughts diminished. Memories could surface when the Kig'Yar screeched melancholy noise they dared to title 'music'. His pride and merciless rein as Fleet Commander proved to be something more significant. "This Council, called upon by Captain Rdvas R'Lamee, has drew their judgement."

"Honourable Council," the younger brother recited in a tone of vague distress. "I accept any judgement passed with grateful hands. Forever I will serve. Praise the ground, do not forget my name- no consequence shall ever change my devotion. What judgement do you pass, High Council?"

"Acceptance."

"...!"

"Your reasonings, despite your inability to shut your trap when told, are sound otherwise. Do not fail your brothers. Your homeland. Take the Highest Regard and march forth."

Rdvas trembled, keened in gratitude. "I accept your Highest Regard. My blood will spill for the might of Sanghelios- of the Covenant. March on, I will." The younger male spun on his heel, leaving the room at once. Two webbed toes on each leg of Captain Rdvas R'Lamee swept over tiled floors, out of the quarters reserved for high ranking officials.

\*\* . . . \*\*

\_Two, young Sangheli males sprinted across open plain, kicking up grain grown by hired Kig'Yar. Said Kig'Yar barked in obvious protest as the males mockingly laughed in response. Shorter than the other, Rdvas closed the distance between himself and an approaching tree. Growls of challenge danced along the harmless breeze. \_

\_Amble feet bounced from one trunk to the next until a hand with three double-jointed digits coiled around a twisted piece of frozen greenery. Young Rdvas gleefully laughed at his companion on the ground, propelling himself so he his other hand could grasp the branch. \_

\_"I guess that makes me the better-suited Kaidon, Thelmacus!" Thel narrowed amber orbs in clear disapproval. He may have been the elder



brother, the wiser brother but he did not have to stand for this... instability. \_

\_And yet, he accepted such a challenge from Rdvas. Young males would always be young males. Hunting for some sense of honour on a planet soon to be distraught with war weighing heavily on each child.\_

\_Do not fret.. Never fret... Mother could whisk pain out of existence... \_

\_Mother remained always. \_

\_Always..?\_

\*\* . . . \*\*

Panels parted in stale grace to display the standard Covenant loading bay. Captain R'Lamee shuffled in, checking the soldier of some worthless Sangheli lower in rank than himself. The younger officer bristled. Clenched his teeth in silence as the Captain continued on without remorse. Now is the time for Rdvas to rise, to show that he too could be worthy.

And finally prove to his brother that he could be worthy of kinship.

That he could be worthy of their mother's blood.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>RAWWWWRRRRRRRGGGHH!<em>"

A seemingly unstoppable creature, vibrated in deep anguish and hatred, jostling as its shield sunk into the sand. Its armored enemy balanced on his toes, knees bent just slightly as he observed the Hunter through his visor. John took a risk drawing away the Hunter's attention like he did. Though his effort went towards an unconscious Stacker, along with the recently injured Valor, tucked behind the downed 'Hog. If he could somehow make the beast turn around..

Air crackled under the intense heat the Hunter's cannon emitted. The Spartan had just moments- if he screwed this up, this stunt would surely guarantee his death. Charged, surging and rattling with the force of the fuel rod, the cannon released the neon green projectile as it screamed another battle cry. John dodged two seconds early. Early enough and yet at the same time, much too late. He danced around the tangerine wormed parasites exposed in gap of the creature's back. Leveling the M41, he took several steps back. The Hunter twisted its massive torso around, recharging the fuel rod cannon as John pulled the trigger.

Somehow through the splattering of blood in its death the bastard managed to discharge that damned projectile. Cortana could barely finish her warning before it impacted the Master Chief. Odd, how a substance so luminescent, glowing in nature could send him flying five yards down the beach. Blood painted his desert dry lips. Pain laced along his shoulder. "I don't suppose this will be the end of your stunts?"

John choked on his wry chuckle, specks of blood staining the inside

of his helmet, "And why would I want to do that?" Cortana remained silent; she did not feel it necessary to argue with him over this. However there happened to be a sassy retort diving off of the tip of her tongue-

Radio feed filtered in through his helmet. "\_Sierra three-twelve, Alpha reporting in.\_" Chief stalked over the Warthog, trailed his gaze along the belly, then pulled it back onto its four wheels. He listened intently for this particular conversation. The Lieutenant reporting in piqued his interest. '\_I doubt anything truly catches her attention, let alone surprises her. There's a first time for everything, though,\_' John's noisy conscience trailed along like an unsuspecting fog.

"\_Go ahead Alpha\_, " Captain Keyes' brusque voice settled into the white noise of the radio. The manner in which he spoke those words stirred an emotion of perplex in John. Somehow, he felt as if there was a private treasure chest laying just beneath the Captain's feet. And he didn't want to budge.

Slow, cautionary breathing drowned out the white noise. Then words again. "\_We've reached the designated destination. Or- Damn it. \_Charles-!" Sounds of gunfire then the whirring of machinery, what seemed to be large objects shifting. "\_Orders, sir?\_" Keyes remained silent for quite awhile. Whether he contemplated his options or happened to be dishing out work for soldiers to hop to, neither Spartan could tell you. However, when his voice filtered through once more, it changed from the brusque undertone of Arizona heat to persistent prickling of pine in winter.

"\_Hold ground, three-twelve. Reinforcements will arrive soon enough. Omega party?\_"

Cortana jumped, "\_Captain?\_"

"\_Have you found the Control Center?\_"

"\_Negative, sir. We have found the Cartographer. It is a matter of getting inside that presents difficulty.\_" Keyes exhaled an amused huffed at her snarky comment. "\_Good. Tread steady, Omega. Alpha party, I'm sending in reinforcements to your location now,\_" the Captain checked around with all the other groups stationed on the field. Each one seemed to be holding its ground for the most part, so he signed off with a wish of good luck for everyone.

John had been busily aiding Valor, restitching some of his wounds he received on the Truth and Reconciliation. Afterward, he managed to get awake the Sergeant, who glared at the sky in his blurry daze. The Spartan provided something to boost his psychedelic state, dressing the gash just above his brow. Each soldier took their previous seats from before, Valor sitting slightly more rigid than before the Hunter ambush. Once the Captain signed off, he settled into his state of mind where he calculated, plotted, patiently waited.

That eerie, serene voice speaking directly to him caused his eyes to close in an attempt to gather his thoughts. Too calm. Now that wasn't really her, right? Oh, but it was her, as she muttered over their private radio connection stretching unimaginable distance: "\_I know how to get you to the Cartographer. Keep treading along like you are now. You'll get here in no time.\_"

Off. Yes, had a piece of her been chipped? Her tone hissed in icy tones, making him shiver away from the undercurrent of the frozen flame. When his mouth opened, it spoke for him. And he couldn't really grasp the understanding of why he said what said to her.

Words tumbled onto the floor like children dropping dated toys.

"\_Humor me\_," he retorted.

Then, and only then, did the world stop.

As if someone pressed the stop button on a recording, paused the movie, halted the traffic. Everything stilled. Everyone held their breath. Every piece of technology on Halo glitched; once, twice, shimmering with that familiar crimson glow.

Awakening the melodic beast.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*\*So, I am slowly coming back. Please don't expect me to be posting very often because I'm rewriting lost material and I want it to be absolutely perfect for you guys who have been so patient with me. Thank you to all the people who have reviewed! ( My lovely 16 supporters! :DD ) I reread each comment which inspired me to post this chapter. Again, without the support of those who follow, like, fave, review both me and my story- I would be nothing. Dust. Much love to all of you guys!

## 9. Too Quiet

\_The most dangerous man to any government is the man who is able to think things out... without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane, intolerable. ~H.L. Mencken\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>"What the hell just happened?"<em>

John originally planned to ease to a stop, but the sudden lurching of the 'Hog's front left wheel rendered said plans useless. He pushed the gas and jerked the steering wheel to a sharp left, skidding in close behind a beach boulder. "What do you mean?" He questioned Cortana, reaching down to put the vehicle in park.

The A.I. rattled in her compartment space. The edging frustration of not knowing obnoxiously gnawed at her conscience. "That excess charge just now. The red glow? Weren't you paying attention?" The second her tone got icy he tuned her out. Like he needed her to tell him how upset and confused she happened to be. "I'm sure they're fine. The Lieutenant can-

"The Lieutenant knows nothing of the protocol to handling sensitive, possible demolition materials! And knowing Charles, they could have

set off a blaring signal that attracts every Covenant ship in existence."

"You know the latter isn't the case."

"Yes, but--"

"The Lieutenant is well aware of what she's doing." A pause.  
"Charles, although I can't vouch for him, wouldn't risk us like that."

Cortana sighed, settling down though she held her ground. "You can't vouch for her either. You don't know her like I do. You don't know the things she's done, the people she did those things to."

He simmered on that momentarily then turned to nod back at Valor and moved to get out 'Hog, signaling to the Helljumpers to do the same. His radar flickered, highlighting red dots meters from their position. "What do you mean?"

"Chiefâ€¦" Reluctant. Reluctant to answer that question, reluctant to pique his interest further. "The Lieutenant ranked incredibly high amongst the list of Spartans. In fact, the same ranking as you."

Yet she did so, despite the fact that she should have kept quiet.

"Originally, she had been assigned to a private sector of ONI," Cortana elaborated. "However, under public record, she was enlisted in the UNSC Navy. A lie, at first, and when that private sector suddenly went dark, she began working full-time for the UNSC. I don't know what happened out in the Skyline Outpost. The only information I could gather unnoticed is that the Lieutenant stayed remained at that outpost until two hours before it fell under demolitions. No one survived."

"I've been caught under the same circumstances. Leaving post a whole two hours before the demolitions went off doesn't exactly raise flags."

"The file--"

"Listen, we need to keep moving. We'll talk about this later." 'Or hopefully not at all,' he thought. "Where is the..."

"Head through the brush. It's not too far off."

Valor nodded in his direction as they all set up perimeter. Cortana highlighted the HUD with a NAV point. She murmured an apology to him as he trekked on, but he ignored her.

John didn't want to believe it, but he knew there was some aspect of the Lieutenant that had him on the very edge.

. . .

Charles exhaled from his new chair hovering over the control panel. Halo's control panel, to be exact. He tilted his back to an expectant Spartan who had just finished reloading her SMG. Above them both, a hologram of the ring rotated in silent peace, its depth casting a

dreaded shadow on each of them.

"It's a weapon."

"We figured that."

At her retort he actually bore his most malicious grin, snapping his fingers to project different sectors of this ring, different machinery that was locked away in lost places. "And it is most definitely a Forerunner object. Have your neural laces responded to the transponder code, yet?"

She froze at his declaration, daring to take one step toward him. "What do you know about my lacing?"

"What is necessary; Dr. Halsey and Dr.-"

His speech halted, rendered speechless by an unseen force. This entire time as Charles continued to speak he processed several million gigabytes of data. What he came across now, what he currently downloaded and began to understand spiraled him into a blanket of silence. "Charles?" The Lieutenant tested the waters to find them frozen. He simply stood there in stasis, mouth slightly agape.

Suddenly his image disappeared entirely. She rushed forward out of reflex to grip the edges of the console, "Charles!"

Charles appeared behind her instead of through the projection terminal on the console panel. He stood at seven feet and rambled immediately to grab her attention. "You need to leave here."

Three-twelve spun on her heel to examine Charles at a Spartan's height. '\_How the hell did he do that? Are A.I.s even capable... No, first, he can't really be placed in the normal A.I. category-\_' Her thoughts stopped to follow what he was telling her.

"This...This creature," his body shimmered, splicing into several mirrors only to merge back into one. "\_Creatures\_. Keyes thought he found a weapons cache and he didn't- fucking idiots- he should have taken you with him!"

"Something went wrong with the op?"

"No, not yet, it's \_about\_ to- you have to stop him. Idiots, \_idiots\_, " the series of shuddering images began once more, "i-i-idiots!"

The Lieutenant turned her head to the locked door, pondering what she should do. "I have to keep the Control Room secured. That's the mission objective. Perhaps the Master Chief?"

Charles placed both hands on her shoulders, "See for yourself," the pictures being surged through her mind thanks the neural lacing he mentioned earlier.

'\_Oh fuck\_, ' had been her first thought.

Then, '\_I need to find the Captain.\_'

The A.I. finished, making his point. He watched her carefully, his customary grimace adorning his crimson face. "Charles, you'll have to stay here. The Chief is too far off of the grid. And... I'm giving you permission to help him in anyway possible. Get him here, double time." Charles silver eyes narrowed. For once, he had nothing to say. For once, he felt a sense of pride.

She couldn't waste any more time than she already had; the LT marched to the Control Room door, leaving an amused Charles behind her.

"One more thing," he called, just before her fingers pressed the buttons to open the door. "Holland is your surname, I know, but you should stick with it. Besides me and that armor, it's all that you have."

The Lieutenant looked back at him, nodded, murmuring, "Try not to fuck anything up."

Long after she stepped into the unforgiving snow and found a ride on a Phantom, he moved from his spot to once again sit on the terminal. His hand waved in front of himself to show the live video feed of the Phantom she hijacked trekking to the swamps.

"No promises, Holland."

He realized in an instant that their tale of woe finally begun.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong> Since summer is beginning and I'm done with school for the next two months, I've decided to catch up on my stories. And I'm all caught up on them! :D So expect new chapters every two weeks. And thank you to those whom have reviewed, favorited, and commented. Trust me when I say that it is very much appreciated. Your support comes a long way in helping me find inspiration. Especially DragoLord, who has contrubuted an amazing character to this story. Much love guys, until next time!

## 10. I Would Have Been Your Daddy

\_'I know it is a bad thing to break a promise, but I think now that it is a worse thing to let a promise break you.' \_-Jennifer Donnelly

\_Harsh, labored breathing happened to be the only sound slicing through the room's silence. Littered across the lab's walls were specks of blood that could pass the eye without notice. Halsey saw it, cringed even, as she stood silent next to the occupant on the operating table. The occupant, dubbed the Beta-Strike Project, shuddered uncontrollably. They opened their mouth and winced as the dried blood caked around the edges broke into pieces. \_

\_"A-am I done?"\_

\_Halsey sighed as she examined the data scrolling along the screen of her tablet. She brought it close to her face in order to cover the distressed expression now adorning her features. This testing had been stressful for each of them; lurching from the darkness to steal

sleep, peaceful pastimes. Swallowing her personal feelings, she kept her gaze like granite as she met the eyes of the girl laying before her. \_

\_"Your results for the last testing weren't satisfactory. Diagnostics are... odd," Catherine murmured the last word, tapping on her tablet.\_

\_Quiet groans tumbled from the girl's lips. Another drop of blood gathered at the corner of her mouth; tears seemed to evade her once she first stepped into the arms of Doctor Halsey and Doctor Kellum. Catherine continued her device scrolling, setting in on the operating table once she felt she had a good grip on her feelings. Behind her was a table littered by various scalpels, knives, and small data chips typically reserved for fixing A.I. or manufacturing data caches. A specific gold chip shone proudly amongst the general silver which Halsey plucked between her index and thumb finger. At that moment, Kellum's presence swept through the room like hurricanes off the coast. Catherine regarded the dark-haired woman in kitten-heels casually. She nodded her head in subtle approval (perhaps even praise) as Kellum towed in her customary cart behind her slim figure.\_

\_Kellum spoke next, masked emerald eyes narrowing in on the dilated electric blue beneath her. "Holland-" Her Scottish accent halted mid sentence as their subject sputtered, rage rolling through the Spartan's form.\_

\_"D-do not. \_Fucking. \_Call me that!" \_

\_Kellum remained unphased. "Three-twelve, then?" \_

\_No further objections rose.\_

\_"You have withstood this longer than what we originally deemed you would. You will be a legend to mankind. If you survive these last testimonies."\_

\_Catherine leaned across the Spartan, hotly spewing at Kellum, "This is not a religious sanctum. We aren't doing to this to tap dance for a God and hoping to get rain. I've warned you about this, Della."\_

\_"And I've warned you about placing yourself in a bird's nest." Catherine sat back immediately as if struck by fire. Kellum sighed, appearing apologetic yet her cold tone contrasted to her expression. "Cousin..."\_

\_"If that is how you see these children..."\_

\_"No, I-"\_

\_"Della, I know that you're in a fix but-"\_

\_"Cathy, just-"\_

\_Their desperation to find some solace amongst inner conflict through morals and experimenting on children shattered as the young girl beneath them coughed involuntarily. Blood sprayed from her mouth, alarming each of the older women. Kellum happened to be the first to

get her word in.\_

\_"Iodine, 700. Catherine?"\_

\_Halsey nodded, getting down to business. "Yes, we'll need to work fast to place the scythe along the cranium and install the...Damn it. We'll need to keep her elevated, I can't work with her jerking into movement every five seconds."\_

\_Kellum chuckled gently. It happened to be anything but cheerful. "You did insist on switching out Ackerson's formula to enlist a version of your own."\_

\_"You know damn well why I did what I did." Catherine closed her eyes as she remembered how she nearly gotten herself killed attempting to switch out Ackerson's ridicule and fragile augmentation formula. The Spartan wasn't quite like the young boy she encountered once, but she did resemble his strength and audacity. Truly, three-twelve happened to be a new person by product, an anomaly; not a Spartan I, nor II, nor III. She hadn't really decided what to call her, yet.\_

\_Kellum nodded as she began to inject the Spartan; her eyes momentarily fluttered as the room blared full of light. Her body tingled distantly. Then she felt the blade- the blade, and no pain arose from it. Just pulling and rearranging like the last seven weeks.\_

\_Della's last sarcastic comment dropped for the evening as she delicately placed several data caches inside the round metal plate on the base of three-twelve's skull, connecting them wry, thin wires and minute machinery that lined the inside of the inside of the flesh of her neck. "Like with that lovely little lad of yours? Jacob Keyes, right Cath?"\_

\_Catherine turned frigid under Kellum's silver joke, attempting to remain focused on the project's vitals as the weight of Della's laughter burdened her. \_

\_Again, Halsey peered at the young girl. \_

\_The poor child, her sorrowful, open irises gaging Catherine in a sort of mental debate. The woman's expression softened as she placed herself next this girl. To this...\_

\_"\_\_\*\*Hyper lethal vector\*\*\_\_."\_

\*\* . . . \*\*

Maniac screeching echoed across the sloshing, humid swamp. The Lieutenant paused, pushing aside her memories to completely tune into her surroundings. Just what the hell had that been? It really didn't feel like the typical croaking. She inhaled heavily, lungs expanding dramatically to process the scents that filled the air.

Taint.

There happened to be a taintedness painting the edges of the private, backwater swamp surrounding her person, but she couldn't identify its nature. Trekking on, Holland ventured further into an impending doom.



The Captain had not arrived yet; this is what Charles explained to the female on her discreet trip over. She held her breath, trying to convey what lived and breathed before her. Receiving no sorts of customary mental alarms, she went about her path.

Not far off, another shallow squawk wrenched through the swamp.

Her muscles involuntary contracted, sensing an impending doom waiting to crawl through her soul. She pushed on, however, ignoring this sense of dread that hovered above her being. She passed by several tattered trees. Eventually, Holland paused to inspect one of trees just as chattering cut through silence. One brow furrowed, she glanced behind to check for a lone ranger, observed her radar twice, then whipped back around to snap pictures of the tree using the installed camera inside her helmet.

Twigs snapped directly behind her person. The Spartan turned, suddenly finding herself pinned to the tree by a slim three fingered hand. Immediately she struggled against her oppressor only to have him chortle lowly.

"\_Kaidon.\_"

What?

Rdvas peered at his capture, this unnerving calm expression adorning his features. He felt exhilarated! To have captured one of these demons by hand- but a kaidon! A great leader who would surely be missed in her absence. The thought made him snarl. "All alone. A shame. Why have you not dragged your brethren along to die beside you?"

Speaking English did not happen to be an asset for, oh, pretty much the entire Covenant Armada. Now this bastard wanted to waste her time with talk? Holland snarled, opened her mouth. Closed it after his hand tightened considerably.

"No response?" Rdvas taughened, his other right hand pulling the energy sword from his side. It sizzled to life, crackling heat spitting about in hazardous plasma surges. His mandibles extended to showcase rows of brilliant pearl teeth as he leaned closer to the Lieutenant. She stilled momentarily, as did he, an echo of an explosion spreading through the creek.

Their heads turned to the direction of the noise. Rdvas cursed under his breath. He knew he should have guided those low-level \_mongrels\_ mewling about. So much for hard work. The Lieutenant took her opportunity when it presented itself to her; Emile's kukri became nothing more than a blur as it cut across the elite captain's face. Rdvas staggered backwards. Snarling and spewing blood he glanced up at his once capture to find her SMGs pointed not at him, but bulbous creatures scurrying to their persons.

They were hideous; almost popcorn like to Holland as she gave off short controlled bursts. Honestly she was less concerned about the elite as he too swatted at the distorted yellow colored bastards dancing about them. It felt like hours had passed; like there were thousands of ants climbing on top of open picnics. All that mattered to them is that they were fine and the things were...well, popped.

R'Lamee glanced at his prize momentarily. She reloaded her SMGs at his side-gazing and aimed them at his head.

"What the fuck were those?"

The alien scoffed at her question, "I know as much as you do, kaidon."

Her helmet visor gleamed brightly under his spectacle gaze. From what she could tell he told the truth. Really didn't feel like some Covie trickery. But then..

"And the weapon's cache?"

His head snapped backwards, eyes narrowed. A clear question. "You think us to be so inferior as to put weapons within your reach?"

"Your friends have a history of making stupid mistakes."

"Then we stand even on the battlefield, kaidon."

Holland's lips quirked at his dry sense of humor, her eyes narrowing at the energy sword in his hand. It hummed lowly and her red eye locked onto it, her HUD displaying the amount of energy left. Just seven percent? If he really wanted to try something she could just pop one in his eye and be done with it. The elite could prove useful.

Deafening silence reigned about each figure to create an air of uneasiness. Rdvas refused to move now; his energy sword would run out of power and he couldn't leave her. He had her in his grasp. So damn close! Fear had the movements of a serpent as it trailed up his vertebral column, slithered his neck in a noose, then cautiously began to extract the oxygen from his lungs. The Lieutenant nodded off to the distance.

"Start walking. I want to meet your friends."

"You think me to be a fool-" Rdvas snarled, shivering slightly at the emotionless visor.

"I think you'll be a foolish carcass in about thirty seconds if you don't start fucking marching, Split-Jaw." His jaws sealed on reflex. Raising himself from the ground, Rdvas turned his back on the Spartan, lifting his hand to cover his recently injured eye. One shaky step. Another. Dishonor made him nauseous. To think, what would Thel do if he caught him?

Holland shuffled onto her other foot. She licked her lips and told him to lead the way. Their forms became nothing more than wisps of inky darkness within the cocoon of the swamp. This predicament could truly work towards her favor.

Captor is now held captive.

\*\* . . . \*\*

John debated entering the complex accompanied by Valor and Stacker.

They tried to get through the first building they found, but the Covenant locked it down tighter than an ONI spook. He sighed, tracking the large duodec red dots on the radar. Static traced through his suit. A channel bridged itself, ringing his ears. Stacker bit back a curse as he braced the sides of his helmet while Valor had long since shook his own off.

It wasn't just him, then.

"\_Hope you boys aren't afraid of a little fire.\_"

Cortana responded quicker than John could process the voice on the channel. Charles chuckled at his blue counterpart's alarm, telling her she needed to take a break once in a while before she broke the toy soldier.

"You're under strict orders to remain under radio si-" She growled.

"\_Ah, ah! \_You \_are. Captain dropped off of the grid soâ€¦.. leaves you with me.\_"

Static laced through the channel again, heavier than the first occurrence. "Cortana, can you clean that up?"

"I'm trying, butâ€¦ his distance is unmeasurable at this rate. There's also the possibility of something interfering with the signal."

"Covenant?"

"\_Don't worry your pretty little head, gumdrop. 'Sidesâ€¦ h-here. Damn. Alright, I only have a few minutes to do this. Blue, you're gonna wanna to hail Foehammer to pick up the Hell Troopers and scuttle you next.\_"

"In case you may have forgotten, we have a \_job\_ to do. This isn't time for fun and games," John winced at the feel of her icy wrath to which he played victim before. "Whatever it is that's up your sleeve, save it. Where is Sierra three-twelve?"

Charles hummed in nonchalance, "\_L-lost connection a-... -tered the bayou to scour for Keyes almighty.\_"

John caught that. "Why would she do that?"

"\_He's about to head into a suicide-mission. One that'll be in vain if you guysâ€¦..rry. List-teâ€¦.can't hold this any l-longer-r-r-r-r-r-r. Call Foeham-mer-r-r. Make the rounds, clear the area, thenâ€¦.open it,\_"

Charles' voice became faint in the sea of whitewash. His connection cut immediately out.

Valor lifted his now covered head to stare at the Chief. "Open what?"

\_Ker-CHINK! SSSSTâ€¦.!.!\_

John felt more than heard the startled reaction of the hunters in the yard as they turned to evaluate their newborn discovery. The Spartan peaked up, watching as the top to the structure in the middle of the

yard ceased movement. "We're not opening anything. He is."

"Well, you're call, Chief," Stacker murmured. "Whatever it is, the boys and I are right behind ya'."

An opportunity to thoroughly consult his thoughts/reasonings rarely happened at this point in the war. With a sigh he reloaded his rifle and gestured for Valor's launcher. Armor plated boots decimated the gravel they walked upon. John relayed orders for Valor and Stacker to find cover and give him cover on the high ground. Pepper them with bullets and aim for the orange gaps between the navy plated metal.

"Cortana, hail Foehammer."

"On it."

One Hunter turned at the sound of his approach as it tensed for an onslaught of relentless battle.

John rolled his neck; a habit he picked up from the Lieutenant.

"Fuck protocol," he mumbled. An itch kicked along his throat. Nicotine. He'd never tried it before but the memory of Johnson's cigars wafted towards him during that moment. His A.I. companion bristled at his words. She paused to see if he would say anything else. Continued when he didn't.

'\_You better be right\_, ' John sent the mental thought to her.

'\_Or all of this bullshit will be for nothing.\_'

\*\* . . . \*\*

"That stench-

Rdvas lurched forward at the feeling of a barrel pressing into his back, thus interrupting what he intended to say. His low growls went unnoticed or better yet this Demon ignored them as she tilted her head.

"What are you on about?"

"The creatures that were encountered before," he refused to use the word 'we', to imply that they were in cahoots. Apart of a whole. "Possessed this same...\_scent\_. It is stronger here." He raised one hand to point towards the opening of the building.

Lights flooded the area at the base of the hill-side's opening, guiding the way.

Rdvas and Holland threw a glance at each other. Neither were sure of what to do at this point. But she couldn't call reinforcements in to handle an unknown- there was the potential of being slaughtered. And he sure as hell couldn't call anyone, what with being a captive.

"So keep close and you might not die. Or whatever it is those things do to you. I want to know what's inside this bunker."

"As you wish," Rdvas snarled, taking the first steps forward.

"\_\*\*RARGGGGGH-SSSSsssss!\*\*\_"

## 11. Rolling Thunder

"\_Theology is never any help; it is searching in a dark cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn't there. Theologians can persuade themselves of anything.\_"

-Robert A. Heinlein

It appeared as though they were spiraling into the tunnel in search of nothing. Just continuing to center downwards for no apparent reason but- that wasn't right. They were here to search for the control room as Charles had explained to them the further they traveled down the tunnel. Lower they reached, the stronger his signal became. Quite a strange thing for tunnels. 15 men dormant aboard that Pelican; fourteen were ODST. John rechecked his rifle, routinely adjusted the settings on his HUD. He made a count of all of his current weaponry adding in two plasma grenades to the mix after his third stock check.

Lids swayed heavily under the masks of those men whose feet tapped to unknown rhythms whose hands shuttered at the habit of erratic gunfire. They weren't sure what they'd find \_if \_they ever encountered it.

"\_Ah, now that I'm done running diagnostics and keeping that head case the fuck out of my way, we can talk properly.\_"

Charles found managed to interrupt his meaningful line of thought.

John rolled his eyes out of habit at this point. "The Covenant?"

"\_Not at all,\_ " the A.I. muttered thoughtfully. "\_Forerunner, believe it or not. And incredibly annoying\_."

"Then we'll need to get to you as fast as possible. What's your location?" Cortana informed him that Charles had already sent coordinates and placed a marker using his HUD. John notified Echo then briefed the rest of the crew in the cabin. "This is a recon-free op. Eyes on at all times, stick together." Each soldier saluted, shouted a 'yes sir' then reloaded their weapons. He felt restless during times like these as he settled into his seat and justâ€¦|\_felt.\_ The last time he did that he was in the midst of Spartan training attempting to get back to camp using an A.I. to fly their pelican. His mind drifted to Reach, to Blue Team, to Halsey, to...the Lieutenant. They had left on awkward circumstances, leaving themselves with bitter tastes in their mouths and he couldn't understand why.

Did her sudden change in attitude truly have to do with his concern for her? All he had honestly tried to do was make sure that she was up to top speed and she lashed out- quietly and quickly, but lashed out nonetheless. John hummed, bringing up schematics for his suite

temperature. Thinking better of it, he closed the options and leaned into his seat as the pelican began to rapidly descend. A platform slowly rose to greet them, housing two turrets and an entire barrage of grunts sans elite towering above them. The grunts scrambled-naturally- and John stood, signaling to the Helljumpers to follow him. He jumped from the open hatch to land on the platform some mere few feet below, his league of soldiers following suit.

"Weapons free!" Chief ordered managing to gun down the aliens that didn't run into the door built into the granite wall.

"All right, give me a second to ask Charles about this compound's layout. In the meantime, head through that door."

"On it."

\*\* . . . \*\*

They scoured for hours through a terrain of forgotten complexes, ice, snow, and Covenant, to get to this point. Valor assured the Chief he could hold position at the base of the mountain with those who remained until evac arrived. John didn't argue, instead moving to help the men build a small defensive position with what turrets remained. Valor nodded off, handed John a couple of grenades and a health pack and turned back to manning the perimeter until Echo showed up. Now he was patiently climbing an elevator shaft entirely too narrow with Cortana and Charles a washed out murmur in his ears. His ears perked up when Charles shared new intel.

"...\_been trying to reach the Captain. What is is about the word 'urgent' that suddenly makes everyone \_not \_answer?\_"

"Have you tried backup channels?"

"\_Two steps ahead of ya, blue. Backup channels, the backup for backup channels. Nada.\_" He paused here as if to considering. "\_I could try the Covenant Battlenet. An amusing option-\_"

"-But is it necessary? Keep hailing him, Charles. We're almost there."

"\_I know, I can see your progress! There's this thing called administration permission that just works wonders, you should try it. Might improve that dour mood of yours.\_"

"Cortana, out."

"\_Love you too-\_"

"First the Lieutenant and now the Captain. You don't think-"

"No. There has to be an explanation for this," John muttered as he stepped out of the lift and proceeded into the larger portion of the building. He meticulously mowed down every Covenant presence inside, all the while listening to Cortana cut through the CBnet's chatter to find anything useful. She shared tidbits here and there about something being unleashed and then contained. Processing new data, she listed off transmissions of a 'demon searching for the Forerunner's demise'. From context it seemed as though they were talking of the Lieutenant, but no word on Keyes. John stumbled out

onto a bridge stretched over the matrixed metal at least 20 stories below him. He stared for a moment at the architectural beauty illuminating through the thin veil of swirling snow. In awe he began to ask the most obvious question.

"\_Welcome to the Control Room, lady and gent. If you would so kindly get your asses in here- that'd be great\_."

Cortana locked his HUD onto the Banshee several yards from his position, "Good luck fighting for it."

\*\* . . . \*\*

"We're clear, open the doors," John barked, his back to the control room, visor swooping the top of the citadel from left to right to ensure that no one else could get inside. The doors jolted into motion as the green drab of armor slipped inside, securing his battle rifle as he glanced at the structure within. It was \_enormous\_ for lack of better vocabulary. His feet echoed across pale cyan, translucent glass inevitably reminding him of the Lieutenant.

"This isâ€|" Even Cortana had to pause. A once in a lifetime moment.

He smirked, picking up the pace once he saw the larger doors at the end of the hallway. "Don't get comfortable."

"Oh, I won't. Still. Not a bad place to be for a millenia. If the Forerunners even had that long to busy themselves."

"They built this," he offered, gesturing about him. "Must have some sort of time on their hands." At the mention of hands he extended his fist to knock twice on the metallic entrance. The doors slide open to reveal this statue-sized image of Charles looking...menacing. He shook his head as he looked through John.

Master Chief froze glancing behind him at the open doors, "Charles-?"

"The Lieutenant, the Captain- All in the same place, all at the same time. If you can hurry- \_Damn it!\_ No, we'll have to sort for hard transfer. We need to leave, \_now.\_"

"Easy, just start from the beginning...What's wrong?"

"When the Lieutenant went on a hunt for Keyes, they- she- \_Chief-\_"

"Okay, alright, we go now. We need coordinates and a briefing...And escort."

"On it, Chief. \_Cortana to Echo 419, we going to need evac\_â€|"

"You're taking me with you, Spartan. You'll my help seeing as I have access and directions. Leave Cortana here, she can keep things running while we're gone."

"Charles, I don't-"

"It's probably for the best, Chief. If this is as urgent as he's making it to be, then you'll need all the guidance you can get. Let's hurry."

Truthfully he felt a bit disoriented to have things simply decided for him like that, moving at snail's pace as he replaced Cortana's chip with Charles'. He hesitated momentarily before sliding the disk into the back of his helmet a hiss escaping him at the burning sensation that mirrored the pain of a migraine. Charles' snort echoed around him. His HUD flashed red as the AI adjusted itself in his suit muttering about how Cortana had no decency to clear the clutter she left behind in people's storage units.

John could not muster the courage to ask.

"Echo's eta is in 10, Chief. You'll have time for a short briefing with Silva, a meal, and then you can go hunting."

Spinning heel, he trotted down the long hall to doom hearing Cortana shout something behind to which he ignored as Echo arrived a full seven minutes early.

"Oh man, you and I are going to have a story to tell after this, Wonder Boy."

"I won't hesitate to kick your ass."

"\_Pink Floyd Greatest Hits\_, it is!"

\*\* . . . \*\*

\*\*A/N:\*\* I just have it in my head that John begrudgingly accepts Charles' presence in his head and when John starts to threaten him, Charles will just play 21st century music on \_blast\_ and absolutely not give any fucks- \_\*\*per his usual\*\*\_. To clarify some plot knots (kinky); this is simply a filler chapter, I did not feel it necessary to the story to list the entire \_Assault on the Control Room\_ to detail. I'm sure that many of us have played that mission more times than we can count (I know I have). We \_\*\*might\*\*\_ see more of the Lieutenant, Rdrvas, and maybe some heavy Keyes/Halsey angst in the next chapter (Keyes/Halsey angst is my only kind of angst) andâ€¦ I have no idea how I'm going to write the Flood. Because the Flood will show up (already have) and it will be super tedious and annoying for everyone to fight. OH, and Spark is bound to pop up too! So, there's all of that to look forward to or to dread (whichever is your preference). Until next chapter : )

## 12. Well Enough Alone

\_Out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be, for my unconquerable soul. In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance my head is bloody, but unbowed. Beyond this place of wrath and tears looms but the horror of the shade, and yet the menace of the years finds, and shall find, me unafraid. It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.\_  
â€”\_Invictus\_, \_William Ernest Henley



\* \* \*

><p>In the distance creatures croaked and growled, bugs flittered about and fog lazily formed, giving the scene before the Spartan II an eerie appearance. Trees that only seemed possible in books drifted, in and out of view as the Pelican carried on through the swamp. The scent of rain and mud filtered through his suit to wrap around his nose, and for a moment, he thought of to Reach and its smell after the rain, the clean earth cared for by farmers who worked nonstop to keep their farms in the highest condition, striving to keep their crops from dying out.<p>

'\_It's probably all dust and echoes by now\_.'

Foehammer checked her monitor inside the cockpit, reading through it hastily. "This is the last spot, sir," the co-pilot rumbled behind her. She nodded hastily, swallowing back the sense of dread creeping along her throat. "Chief, this is the same marsh both the Captain's and Lieutenant's last signal emanated from when they came here to find the weapons cacheâ€| " Rowley closed her eyes momentarily, exhaling softly. "That was over \_twelve \_hours ago."

John looked out at the scenery before him, his mouth lulled into its customary grim frown. Charles eventually stirred from his much needed 'slumber', presenting himself as violet static dancing across the HUD of the visor. John stepped out of the Pelican as it paused momentarily over the water. He glanced around, his assault rifle already looking for trouble. After giving precise orders for Foehammer to circle the perimeter and keep watch for anything sounding even remotely like UNSC (though he had his doubts, at this point), he sauntered off into murky, heavy darkness.

He broke the silence minutes later as he trudged up a hill littered with pea colored blades of grass. "Any sign of the Lieutenant?"

Grumbling, the AI retorted, "\_No\_", and I don't expect to hear anything from her either. She's a Lone Wolf operative. She wouldn't have stayed here for long if she didn't need to."

The Spartan mulled that over momentarily.

"The Captain?"

"Foehammer said it to a 'T'; no action past their arrival 12 hours ago. Maybe-Oh that's...\_interesting\_."

"What is it?"

"Track left, just up ahead. There's a downed Spirit and Pelican."

Trotting down the hill, he paused at its base to sweep his eyes across the scene before him. Definitely structural damage. From the manner in which the hole curved outward of the Spirit, it appeared that he was correct about internal damage. He ventured closer to the crash site. His visor locked onto an empty SMG deserted in haste. John lifted it to his face with all the caution of a deer in front of the rifle, gritting his teeth when Charles confirmed that it was indeed the Lieutenant's. Charles questioned him as to what he wanted

he do.

What \_could\_ he do?

She wasn't here now.

Evidence depicted her story of fighting in more than just close quarters. In haste, too. Combat was a matter of precise execution for her, if she could help it. He had an inkling that an anger had risen in her throat, knowing she'd left forms of her presence behind. Luck could be on his side however; there could be more evidence further on. And so, he ventured past the wreckage.

\*\* . . . \*\*

\_Her eyes were so bright now. So very different and unnatural from what they were before. From the vibrant brown she'd grown used to. Her hands reached out to the mirror to trace the face of this stranger; her shaven head, split lip, tear-streaked cheeks. Nothing of her remained the same. All she owned now- all she was to the world- twisted into three digits. Simple digits. \_

\_Three. \_

\_One.\_

\_Two. \_

\_All that she dreamt of bled into an oblique world. No longer did she feel festive during the holidays (she rarely glanced at the calendar). Bones once fragile were not; they were meant for larger bodies, for mature minds, and somehow, deep down, she didn't encompass any of that. \_

"\_Halsey."\_

\_The woman trudged through the complex of the ONI building. Expression stoic with a chin held high but the Spartan knew better. Accustomed to Halsey's every little move, flinch, and twitch- just as Ackerson wished her to be. She felt relief just briefly when the older female passed through a narrow door unscathed. The girl watched for several minutes after the door closed. Her current position upon a ceiling beam gave her a mapping of majority of the hallway. Quite a few times the facility AI Desmond timidly asked her to climb down to which she would never respond. \_

\_Besides a correspondent scowl dancing across her face. \_

\_Halsey consumed her every thought. '\_Halsey saved me\_', she realized several times. As weeks of numbing rehabilitation tumbled into months of vigorous training, Halsey was soon forgotten. She never saw her again after her last surgery. The bronzed image of the doctor with grey-streaked hair faded after time. Nevertheless, even though her face melted into her subconscious, the dark-haired woman's words did not. \_

\_\*\*Hyper.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Lethal.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Vector.\*\*\_

\_She felt it- that burning twist of strength behind every punch. They pitted her against the others in Beta, asked them to combatively teach each other new things. Never learned much with any of them. Except that they hated her. Hated the manner in which Ackerson kept her under close scrutiny. Kept her \_safe.\_ So when the routine 'combative camaraderie' rounds rolled around, a few of the other Spartans were more than just peeved.\_

\_She became a threat. A goal to surpass. Nothing more than a thicket of vines covering the path forward. \_

\_The first time she fought her comrades, she held back. Unsure in strength and mind. \_

\_They nearly slit her throat. \_

\_The second time, she swung first at her opponent and she \_beat them. Bloody.

\_Gone was the apprehension, the caution. Dissolved into mere ferocity; she hissed and kicked and bit and never glanced back. They all knew what to call her then. Called her a Lone Wolf when she sat alone at the tables chewing thoughtfully through stale food as she read from data pads. \_

\_The only time she learned something was when they paired her to the girl with the cryptic mind. '\_Kat,\_' she always insisted in a heavy Slavic accent whenever addressed by her number. Kat taught her to analyze. Did Kat win that fight? \_

\_No.\_

\_But it was the first time someone approached her without a second thought and she respected her for that. They stuck together until Kurt sectioned them into different groups, until TORPEDO went wayward, until they began to be picked off one by one.\_

\_It wasn't until they paired again on Reach that she realized how much Kat had helped her in their youth. \_

\_Had not realized how much she valued that kinship until sheâ€|\_

\_Until-\_

\*\* . . . \*\*

\*\*11 HOURS PRIOR TO SIERRA 117's DECENT\*\*

Jacob Keyes was old, brazen, and just one grey hair too tired. But he was nothing if not courageous- a lesson that he learned from \_her\_ early on in his life. His face remained pleasantly blank as a Helljumper bobbed his head to AC/DC rumbling away, a concoction of guitar and drums. A gruff ODST captain, Parker, placed her customary bourbon cigar between her lips, lighting it with her silver encased lighter. Smoke danced around them, creating a foggy imagery of drab green uniforms and silent eyes.

Keyes allowed his eyes to shut momentarily. His mind drifted and if he imagined it, wind lashed against his cheekbones, cascaded down his face to nestle in his chest. In the distance he heard a pen scratch against dried paper, a low humming carried along with itâ€¦

\*\* . . . \*\*

"\_Catherine." \_

\_Halsey peered up at her assistant from so long ago, her pen paused in the middle of an elegantly curled '\_q\_' . Perhaps it was just her mind getting the best of her (though nothing got the best of her). Halsey glanced at the doorway at the man dressed from head to toe in military blues and her lips parted. \_

"\_You were always headstrong, Jacob."\_

\_Jacob frowned down at her. He just wanted to give her the news of Miranda's promotion and she wanted to do another piss contest. Moving further into the room, he took the lush leather seat just to her right. \_

"\_Catherine, I don't want to do this again-"\_

"\_\*\*Then why are you here?\*\*\_\_" \_

\_Scrambling for purchase, he dragged one pale hand through his hair. Why did she always manage to steal the breath from him like that?!\_

"\_I thought you would want to know about Miranda."\_

"\_Is she hurt?"\_

"\_No."\_

"\_Pregnant?"\_

\_A snort. "Hardly."\_

"\_If it's so exciting, then you could have sent an email. I don't have time for greetings."\_

"\_Catâ€¦!"\_

"\_You don't have the right, Jacob."\_

"\_Fine. Fine, I'll go." His footsteps trailed to the door.\_

"\_And Jacob?"\_

"\_..."\_

"\_Some things are meant to be buried."\_

\_The older man turned to her, to inquire if that was a threat to he and his daughter, to mutter something about how she didn't speak so much in bed, butâ€¦!\_

\*\* . . . \*\*

"\_Captain, hail from the Lieutenant!\_"

His eyes snapped open at once, "Open up a channel, Raptor. I'm coming up to you." He rose from his seat, making sure his feet were steady. He kept hold of the railings bolted into the walls of the dropship. The cockpit door sealed tight behind him as he stepped inside.

"\_\*\*This is Sierra three-one-two. Are there any foxtrots in the area?\*\*\_"

"We read you, Sierra. I'm going to need a sitrep, soldier."

She huffed heavily over the com, exhaustion seeping through her agitated breaths. "\_\*\*I would if I could. The only reason I'm sending this is because I needed to send a warning to you, Captain. Turn back \*\*\_\_\*\*now\*\*\_\_\*\*. There is not a Covenant weapons cache. REPEAT: there is \*\*\_\_\*\*not\*\*\_\_\*\* a Covenant weapons cache. Respond?\*\*\_"

Keyes eyed Raptor for a moment who continued enroute towards their destination. The Captain asked for an evaluation on what had transpired.. Why leave now? Obviously there was something that needed to be dealt with if it wasn't a cache. She persisted, urging him to go back, her exact words being: "\_\*\*This is nothing to die for, sir. I can assure that.\*\*\_"

Now they were at a crossroads. He wasn't going to leave her behind. Not all soldiers could be saved, but he couldn't just leave her in this mess that he didn't think she created. But would he waste a platoon to head into immediate death? Did it make sense to save someone possibly on the brink of death? Each option weighed heavily, each with its own punishments. Each with its own rewards. He settled onto something though, however fruitless it might have appeared.

"Ready for pickup. We're coming to get you."

"\_\*\*Negative, Captain.\*\*\_"

"\_Spartan three-one-two!\_"

"\_\*\*Some things are best left buried. And that's why I'm going to bury this. The Forerunners called it the Flood. A parasitic life form that feeds on sentient life. If you're compromised, they could get a hold of \*\*\_\_\*\*anything\*\*\_\_\*\* and still have time to wipe Earth out within a few months. We thought the Covenant were bad? The Covies are like drinking oil and the Flood is vinegar.\*\*\_"

Keyes froze, his eyes meeting the reflection in the drop ship glass. He snapped an order to Raptor to turn Johnson's Pelican to back. Shaking pale hands gripped onto the bars mounted along the bulkhead . Sighing, he muttered, "It would be stupid of me to ask if you had a plan."

The Lieutenant grunted, "\_\*\*There's a generator built to monitor tissue samples of the Flood. I've rigged them to overheat and cause critical failure. The structure is too fortified to terminate from the outside. If I can contain as much of the infestation in here as possible, I may slow them down. But I know for a fact that it has

spread and most likely has left the swamp. It needs to feed.\*\*\_"

"How fast does it infect the host?"

"\_\*\*No longer than two, three minutes. After that, it tries to take you down, too. They possess nearly unmatched strengthâ€¦I only have a few more minutes, Captain. I'm sending coordinates and a list of objectives. You need to find Charles and give this to him, he'll know exactly what to do.\*\*\_"

"Can he be trusted with something this significant?"

Holland chuckled and a sound of rustling shot over the com. "\_\*\*I wouldn't have kept him around if he wasn't.\*\*\_"

The older man nodded, pacing the short space of the cabin. "What about you?"

"\_\*\*These generators can't explode by themselves.\*\*\_"

Stopping short of the door, Keyes glanced back over his shoulder. He swallowed back the automatic response that bubbled within his throat. '\_Don't waste your life like this\_' It wasn't even guaranteed that this plan could stop the Flood. He pitched that idea to her to which she retorted in kind. She explained how she could rig the explosion to give herself a certain amount of time to get out. But that meant Keyes only had minutes too. Raptor changed course, making a wide U-turn through the throng of trees and settling at the very edge of the swamp.

"Delay that, Spartan."

"\_\*\*Sir?\*\*\_"

"Sir?"

Both Holland and Raptor sent waves of confusion in his direction. He shot Raptor a glare hard enough to make the young boy gulp and rethink his outburst. The Captain crossed his arms over his chest ordering the boy to turn the bird back around and head into the swamp. Cold blue eyes dimmed harshly under the passing shadows of the swamp.

"Set the generators; it'll buy you time. If this \_parasite\_ is as dangerous as you say it is- and I \_do\_ take your word for it- then we need to find a way to contain it."

"\_\*\*It's likely that it already left the swamp. There isn't much to eat out here.\*\*\_"

"Then it'll be looking for a free meal?"

"\_\*\*The \*\*\_\*\*Autumn, \*\*\_\*\*sir. It's crawling with Covenant.\*\*\_"

He grunted as he dragged his blunt nails along the stubble of his jaw, pressing into the dips and curves of his face. Halsey flashed behind eyes, again and again. A smile then a grimace. A laugh and then a sob. Disdainful whispering.

\_Some things are meant to be buried.\_

"We'll be waiting for you in the marsh. Set the charges, get to the evac point."

"\_\*\*Yes sir.\*\*\_"

"And Spartan? You \_will\_ get to this evac point."

\*\* . . . \*\*

\*\*A/N:\*\* Ah, poor Keyes. : ( Also, if you could place two and two together, you'll understand where the Lieutenant learned to rig shit ; )

End  
file.